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BY

LESLIE KEITH

AUTHOR OF "WHAT AN OLD MYTH MAY TEACH," "A SIMPLE MAIDEN," &c.

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MASTER TROUBLESOME.

CHAPTER I.

THE "BLACK DOG."

OU wouldn't have called him a pretty boy just then.

Nurse said he had the "black dog" on his back. That was what Nurse always said, you know, when two little cross lines came into Van's brow, and his lips turned down at the corners, and his eyes wouldn't look up off the carpet. Van didn't quite believe in the "black dog." At least he never could see it, and he was pretty sure that it was only to Scotch boys and girls that it came, not to a little boy who lived in a big house in a London square.

All the same, Van knew quite well what Nurse meant, and when he was good—which wasn't quite so often as he might have been—he used to think that he would never give her a chance to say such a thing again.

But then Van very soon forgot. He had forgotten now; and here was Nurse speaking about that horrid dog again, and saying a lot more too. "If little boys will sulk, and won't answer when they're spoken to, they must just be left alone till they choose to be good, and behave nicely again."

That was what Nurse said, and then she locked the jam and sugar in the cupboard, and went away downstairs.

Van didn't like this at all. If he hadn't had a pretty bad fit of sulks, he would have given in, and said the "I beg your pardon" that always had to be said sooner or later rather than be left alone. The nursery was up at the very top of the house; very near the sky, he used to think when he was a little younger. Certainly nearer to the sparrows that chattered and quarrelled in the eaves; and nearer to the tall chimney stacks

than to the dusty and thirsty little garden in the middle of the square, where he used to walk with Mademoiselle.

The odd thing was that Van was quarrelling with—what do you think?—his own name! It wasn't very long, certainly, even at its longest, and that was just what Van found fault with. He had been playing downstairs in the hall, having a most splendid romp with Trim, when "Van! Van!" came sounding over the stairs.

Van had to go up; he knew that. But he went as slowly as ever he could; and when he got in at the door, it wasn't Trim, certainly, that made him stamp his foot, and call out in a passion—"It's a shame to give a boy a name like mine! I won't call any of my sons Van. It's just because it's so little and easy that you are always saying it, Nurse. It's 'Van, come here,' and 'Van, do this,' all day long. I wish I had been called something big and ugly like you, and then people would have grown tired of calling me!"

"You're a wicked, ungrateful boy, Ivan

Valentine," Nurse said, severely; and though Van hated his little name so much, he would rather Nurse had used it then than given him his whole long one; for when she did that, it was certain she was pretty angry, and would probably cut off the jam at tea-time.

And that was just what Nurse did do; and so, to punish himself a little more, Van wouldn't have any tea at all, but stood studying the pattern of the carpet, and pouting his lips till they weren't in the least like the Cupid's bow to which some one had once likened them. It seemed to him, standing there, as if Nurse would never have done pouring out cups of tea for herself, and cutting rounds of bread and butter. He could hear it all, though he would not look up; and once or twice he was tempted to give in; but anger was stronger than hunger just at that minute, and so Van got no tea that night.

It was very quiet when Nurse had left. Van had not even Trim to keep him company. He moved away to the window.

You see, there was no one to look at him now, and it's no use putting on airs all by one's self. It was growing pretty dark—the soft, swift darkness of an early spring night. The shadows gathered in the room behind him, and the chairs and tables seemed to melt away into them. When he turned round, he could still see the white tea-cups gleaming out, and the big, homely face of the clock on the wall. The clock was the only thing in the room that spoke—at least out loud, and even *it* seemed to have nothing to-night to say but "Van, Van; Van, Van," sometimes as if it were cross, and sometimes as if it were sorry. Van leaned his arm upon the window, and looked out. He watched the twinkling lights coming into the opposite windows, and began to count them. One, two, three—no, that was four, six, eight. They all began to dance together, till he couldn't distinguish one from the other. Presently the shutter creaked, and something fell with a clatter to the ground. Van got a good start then, but he wasn't a coward. He stooped down and felt in the

darkness, till he came to something small and hard. Picking it up, he held it very close to the window. "Where did *you* come from?" he said aloud, surprised, looking at the funny little wooden figure.

"Out of the Ark," said a sharp little voice, but so clearly that Van gave another start. "I'm not hurt *this* time, but be a little more gentle again, if you please."

"Oh," said Van, "I'm very sorry; I didn't mean to hurt you—but I don't remember you one bit!"

"I'm Noah," said the little voice; "you put me behind the shutter yourself once, when the black dog was paying you a visit."

"Well," said Van, not taking any notice of the last words, "that must be a good long time ago, for I'm far too big to play with animals now."

"Are you so very big?" said Noah; "I shouldn't have thought it!"

"I'm eight and three-quarters," Van answered; "and I'm sure that's pretty old."

"I should have said, now, you were about three," said Noah, nodding his head.

"That's a good one!" cried Van, shouting with laughter; "but, of course, living in the Ark, you couldn't know much better. I don't suppose you had any boys *there*; and, besides, you must have lived such an awfully long time yourself, that I daresay nobody seems very old to you. If it weren't quite so dark, you couldn't have made that mistake."

"Oh, I judge a good deal by what I hear," Noah answered; "that's the way we old people do; it isn't all *looks* that we go by; and when we hear a boy of eight and three-quarters quarrelling with his own name, for instance——"

"Tell me about the beasts," said Van, hastily. "I never was quite sure whether the big ones or the little ones went in first, and it's such a capital chance to find out from you."

"Oh, certainly," Noah replied; "though it is not very polite to interrupt an elderly person like me." Then Noah began a long story, which made Van think of the tales out of the "Peep of Day," which Nurse

used to tell him, as he sat astride of her knee, when he was quite a little fellow. He seemed to see a long, long procession going to and fro in fine order, marching on and on, and getting smaller and smaller. At first he could hear them all roaring and neighing, and

lowing and grunting, as they went past; then the sounds seemed somehow to grow fainter, and the animals to march faster, and to become less and less distinct, till he quite lost count of them, and, rub his eyes as he would, he *couldn't* see what became of them. Then suddenly they all faded quite away.

It seemed just a minute or two after, that

some one came into the room with a light, and then a voice said—"Bless me! what's the laddie after now!" and there was Nurse stooping over Van, all huddled up in a corner, and fast asleep, and Noah, with half the paint rubbed off his shabby coat, standing with his arms straight down at his sides upon the window ledge, looking as innocent as if he had never spoken a word in his life.

"Get up this minute, Van; this isn't the time to sleep. Here's your papa come home, and you with your suit never changed, nor your face washed!"

Van felt all stiff and queer as he rose and submitted to have his hair brushed. Generally he behaved pretty well at this part of his evening toilet; not because he liked it—he would rather on the whole have gone with dirty hands and uncombed hair—but because it was the first step towards the nicest bit of all the day. For when Nurse had made a gentleman of him, as she called it; when she had seen that his velvet suit was nicely brushed, and his neck-tie neatly arranged,

he used to rush straight off to his father's dressing-room.

"Any new stamps to-night, Father?" was generally his first question, and then he would search in the pockets of the coat his father had thrown off, and almost always found something to add to his stamp-book. There were such a lot of squares to fill up, you see; and Van didn't mind a bit having a good many of the same kind.

But on this night nothing seemed to go quite right, for by the time Van got downstairs, Mr. Valentine had already left his dressing-room, and was seated at table, taking his soup. "Good evening, Father," Van said, advancing slowly into the room.

"Well, my son, how have things gone to-day?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Van; "horridly, I think, and I'm ever so late, but that was Noah's fault and Nurse's."

Mr. Valentine looked up and raised his eyebrows, but he said nothing. Van always sat with his father while he dined, and generally found a great deal to chatter about;

but to-night he attacked a large piece of bread, and was too busy munching to have much to say. He liked the time best when the servants had left the room, and the lamp was lit, and the curtains were drawn. Mr. Valentine used to call him his page or his cup-bearer then, for Van would fill his father's wineglass, and hand him the nut-crackers, or pour out his coffee, just as well as old Simon, the butler, could have done it.

Sometimes he "stood fire," as he called it, for an apple or an orange, and if he let himself get hit without starting or holding up his hands, then the prize became his. When Trim was of the company, you may be sure the fun was doubled.

But to-night Van was not inclined for this mimic warfare. He sat down opposite his father like any sober old gentleman, and looked hard at the fire which Simon had just lighted.

"How is Mademoiselle to-day?" said Mr. Valentine, between the puffs of his cigar, by way of making conversation.

"Well," said Van, slowly, as if he were

thinking about something else. "She had a big bit of flannel round her face, so I suppose she had toothache, or perhaps she had had a letter from the gentleman whose hair she wears in her locket; I didn't ask her, because when I do she always cries. Father," he said suddenly, leaving his chair, and leaning two elbows on his father's knee—"Father, can people change their names when they grow up—men, I mean—not their first ones, but their last ones?"

"Not very easily," said Mr. Valentine, looking smilingly down into the earnest, troubled eyes lifted up to his; "were you thinking of changing yours?"

"Well," said Van; "I do think mine is just the very horridest name anybody could have; I *do* wish it had been longer."

"Perhaps when you grow up, and go to the city," said Mr. Valentine, knocking the ashes from his cigar, "you won't regret its shortness, when you find you have to write it a great many times every day."

"I don't think that will make it any nicer," said Van, shaking his head; "when *my* sons

are babies, I'll not call them anything, and then when they grow up they can choose their *own* names."

"You would distinguish them by numbers, perhaps? I don't think you would find that plan answer very well, my boy."

"At least I won't call any of them after myself. Tell me, Father, did you have me christened Van, when I was a little chap, because you meant me to grow up a merchant like you?"

"Well, no," said his father, with a little smile: "I didn't look quite so far forward, or think much about your future then. I gave you the name you have, because it belonged to one of the best men I ever knew, and because I hoped you might one day grow to be like him."

"Was he awfully good?" said Van, earnestly, beating a tattoo softly on his father's leg.

"He was a true gentleman," said Mr. Valentine, gazing into the fire, and half forgetting his boy's presence; "noble and upright, chivalrous to women, tender to all weak and needy creatures——"

"I'm awfully sorry to hear it," broke in Van, with tremendous gravity. His father stopped abruptly, and looked at him surprised.

"Of course I don't mean that I wish he wasn't nice; but I do wish he had been wicked sometimes. Perhaps he was very troublesome when he was a boy?" he asked in a more hopeful tone.

"No; I think he was a remarkably good boy," said Mr. Valentine, smiling; "but why do you wish he had been wicked?"

"Because," burst out Van, "it's quite bad enough to be called Van, and to have to run when anybody says it; but if ever Nurse finds out that the real Van was such a very good boy, I won't have one single minute of peace any more. Now you know, if I could have been sure that he was a troublesome boy too, it would have been ever so much more comfortable. There she comes," he cried, as Nurse turned the handle of the door, and said, "Master Van, it's nine o'clock."

"Don't tell her, there's a dear good

Daddy," he whispered, as he said good-night.

"Well, we'll keep the secret," said Mr. Valentine, pinching the round, chubby cheek; "only, remember, I would have my son grow worthy of his good name, and then he will think it an honour to bear it."

Nurse walked upstairs, holding her head very high, and with her cap-strings hanging stiff and straight. Van knew quite well what was the matter. He hadn't said those little words yet that would have found their way into the warm place in Nurse's heart, and brought the smile back to her lips. He hadn't said them, and he wouldn't say them —and so he let himself be undressed pretty much as if he had been a statue; and when Nurse said, "Ivan Valentine, say your prayers," he only jumped into bed, and hid his face under the clothes.

But, somehow, Sleep seemed to have a good many other boys to attend to that night. Perhaps he went to the good ones first. At least he wouldn't come near Van, though he tried every plan he knew to coax

him, saying all the rhymes he had learned, and even repeating a French verb over and over. He could hear the loud ticking of the clock in the next room, and this time it seemed to have nothing to say but "Get up, get up!" again and again, till Van could stand it no longer.

At last it stopped for a minute to strike eleven, and before Van had counted one, two, he was out of bed, and across the room. Nurse was seated by the fire, her spectacles on her nose, and her Bible lying open on her lap, when a little scarlet-gowned, bare-footed figure stole up to her.

"I'm sorry I was rude," said Van, abruptly; "next time I'll try to remember, and be more like"——He stopped suddenly short.

You should have seen how Nurse's grave face changed all in a minute! In a twinkling she had Van upon her knee, and was rubbing his cold feet in her two warm hands. Van was half ashamed for a minute; he hadn't sat there since he was a very little fellow, but it was nice to feel good again. The cupboard wasn't very far off, and presently

Van was munching a large slice of bread and jam, and chattering between the mouthfuls with the voice that had suddenly come back to him.

Van didn't object to say his prayers this time; and when he had repeated his usual verse and hymn, he added, of his own accord—"Please don't let the 'black dog' come back any more, and help me to like my name, and to grow up like—like the man I was hearing about to-night."

He had been very near to letting the secret out a second time, but though it was all rather mysterious to Nurse, she asked no questions as she tucked the blankets round him, not even when Van begged her to put Noah on the mantelpiece, close to his bed.

But Noah spoke no more that night, and, strange to tell, though Van looked at him often and often, Noah never did speak another word.

At twelve o'clock Nurse stole very softly on tiptoe to Van's room. Sleep had done his other business by that time, and had come to Van, putting soft arms round him, and wrapping him up, cosy and warm.

CHAPTER II.

STRANGE PLAYMATES.

THE sun got up a good while before Van next morning. Indeed it had stared in at his window, and crept up quite close to his bed, before he rubbed his sleepy eyes and opened them.

"Lazy Van," said the Sunbeams; "the boys over the way have had their breakfast, and are off to school, and your little friend Katie has been out in the garden for an hour or more."

Van jumped up fast enough at that. He peeped out from behind the blind. Yes, the sun was right; there was Katie skipping along the walk with a face as bright as the morning. Her hat had fallen off, and the

rays of light were dancing about her hair, and turning it into shining strands of gold.

Even a town garden, shut in by iron railings, looks a pleasant place in the freshness of an early spring day. The busy people, who hurried through the square on' their way to dingy city offices or shops, thought

the enclosure looked like a little imprisoned bit of the country set in the middle of the houses, to remind them that somewhere—miles away from the smoke and dust and noise—were quiet green lanes, and flowers all washed with dew.

Some little children, who had never seen

the real country in all their short lives, hung about the railings, and watched Katie with big, wistful eyes as she skipped.

Van didn't know much about the country either. He couldn't remember ever having lived anywhere else than in the square with his father, and Nurse, and Simon, and the maids, and Mademoiselle. Only Mademoiselle didn't stay all night. She came for a good many hours each day, but she lived in a lodging with her mother, a very stiff and upright old lady, who wore a large cap all covered over with flowers, and took snuff.

Van went there to tea sometimes, but he was rather afraid of Madame Cornet, who always spoke in French to him, and lamented that she no longer lived in her beautiful Paris. Van wondered, if she liked it so much, why she didn't go back. Once he asked her, but she only frowned, and said little boys ought to be more discreet than to ask such questions. He wouldn't have been very sorry if she had gone, and taken Mademoiselle with her. When he thought of that, he burst out

laughing, for he seemed to see a long procession of his enemies—the regular and irregular verbs, and blotted exercises, and whole columns out of the big fat dictionary —walking away after her; as if nobody else in all London could teach French but his own particular Mademoiselle!

But no such good luck was in store for him this morning. "If I hadn't any lessons to do, I'd be the happiest boy in the world," Van said, discontentedly, looking out longingly at Katie's romps.

Nurse heard him, though she didn't seem to be listening. She looked as if the bright morning had got inside of her somehow, and was coming smiling out at her face, and as if she had never heard of a "black dog" in her life.

"Come and take your breakfast," she said, "and you'll have time for a run in the garden before Mamsell comes."

Van despatched his bread and milk in no time, and ran downstairs, stopping before all the landings to jump three or four steps. Trim enjoyed that as much as his master,

and flew to the door, scratching and scraping, in his eagerness to get out.

But when they reached the garden, no Katie was to be seen. Right round the walk Van ran, but no little figure came with flying steps to meet him. "She's hiding," he said at last, as he stopped panting for breath; "go seek, Trim." Trim was quite used to *this* sort of fun, and immediately began to snuff among the bushes. All at once he gave a short, sharp bark, and then Van popped round the corner. There was Katie, sure enough, but Katie chattering quite gaily to some one else. Van and Trim had stumbled upon quite a family scene.

"Amelia Jane must have a walk," one little Mamma was saying; "exercise is very good for little girls, and makes them grow strong."

"Oh, Augusta is tired; she will sit by me," Katie was answering; "she was out so late last night at the party."

"Oh, that's what you're after, is it?" said Van, loftily, turning on his heel, and calling

to Trim. Van and Katie were rather good friends, but Van was half-ashamed of having a girl for his friend, and wholly ashamed of her when he found her in such company.

"Oh, Van, do come and be Papa; Augusta almost never gets a chance of having a papa," cried Katie, running after him. "Jack won't

play with me, and it is so bad for her to grow up with only a mamma; do come!"

"Not very likely!" said Van. "Trim and I have other things to do than to waste our time with girls!"

Katie drew back quite humbly. She wished *she* had been a boy, as she watched

Van marching along with his hands in his pockets. But as for Van, he felt rather solitary in his independence. One can't stand upon one's dignity without having something to pay for it; but it *was* rather slow work flinging stones at a branch all by one's self, with no little girl to admire and clap her hands when by a rare chance he hit it. So that Van was not quite so sorry as usual to see Mademoiselle, red flannel and French grammar and all, arrive at the door. Generally Van had to be captured and taken by force to the schoolroom, but to-day he went quite meekly.

Even his foes, the irregular verbs, agreed to a truce this morning, and sent the tenses forward in pretty fair order when they were called upon. As for Trim, he sat at his master's feet, with ears cocked, and watchful brown eyes, listening as attentively as if he meant to take a trip to Paris next week, and was anxious to be on speaking terms with the dogs of Mademoiselle's land. Mademoiselle looked as if something very astonishing had happened. She even took off the

red flannel, and never once referred to the model little boy round the corner, who did his exercises without a single blot.

"I had thought thou hadst been altogether a little *gamin*," she said, as she tied her bonnet-strings and took up her reticule, "but I see that thou canst be a gentleman, and it rejoices me."

"Well," said Van, taking a very slow aim with the dictionary at a spider that was crawling up the wall, "I don't think even *he* could have behaved better; that's the other Van, I mean. Done it this time!" he cried, as he picked up the poor ill-used dictionary, and examined the dead spider flattened against the wall. It was just as well that Mademoiselle had gone away, or she might not have made that nice speech at all.

This was Saturday, and Van had a half-holiday. He used to think it a little too bad that he hadn't a whole one like Katie, whose governess got all the day to visit her friends; but a half-holiday spent with his father was better than Katie's whole day by herself—of that he was quite sure. But there was to be nothing so pleasant as a walk or a ride with his father to-day, for Mr. Valentine had left word with Simon that he was going to dine with a friend, and would not be home till the evening. Van hated that city man, and hoped that his boys didn't care for him one bit. Indeed the news, which he got at dinner-time, nearly sent away the little spark

of goodness that had been kindled in his heart, and even the sight of the apple-tart didn't help him much. To make it all just as bad as it could be, it began to rain—little drops at first, then bigger ones, then a regular downpour.

Van flung down his spoon in a rage. "There never was a boy treated like me!" he said, stamping his foot—"never, never. I do believe the rain has come on on purpose, just because I wanted to play, and because it's Saturday."

Van was not so very unlike the April day himself, if he had only known it—smiling and pleasant one moment, angry and frowning the next.

"More folks than you grudge the rain," said Nurse. "Be thankful you've a good roof over your head. Here have I to go all the way to Islington, and the very day your papa's away too, worse luck!"

Nurse was looking rather ruefully at her best bonnet, which she had unpinned from the white handkerchief in which it was folded. "There, be a good boy," she said,

standing at the little glass, as she smoothed out the large bows under her chin; "be careful of the fire, and don't play any mischief, and I'll not say but what there may be something in my pocket when I come back."

"I don't want any of your horrid old cakes," muttered Van from his vantage post at the window. Oh, how well it was that Nurse didn't hear this ungrateful speech!

Next minute the door shut with a loud noise, and presently Van could see her, holding her skirts very high, and spreading out a large alpaca umbrella, as she crossed the square. The last remnant of goodness said good-bye to Van then. "It's no use trying to be like him," he said to himself; "I can't, and I won't, and I'll just be as bad as I can be!"

You wouldn't have thought he had very much cause, if you could have seen all the things that were gathered in that room for his amusement. The cabinet filled with toys, for instance, with its upper shelves full of books—oh, what fine company was there,

to be sure! Ballantyne's brave adventurers, and Kingston's jolly sailors, and a host of others, who were calling out, if Van could only have heard them—"Come and play with *us*, and you needn't be dull!" What adventures Van might have had with wild Henry Fairchild, or the children of Holiday House, or, better still, with Crusoe and his man Friday! But he turned his back on all these tried and trusty friends, and preferred to trace the raindrops with his finger as they raced down the window, and fell into each other's arms by the way.

At last that grew tiresome, and he threw up the sash, and put out his hands to catch them, and let them fall upon his hair as he leaned against the iron bars.

The square was very quiet then. The trees and the grass and the daisies were the only things that said "thank you" to the rain, as it washed their faces and trickled down to their thirsty roots. Presently a little figure came trotting by. Oh, what a queer little creature she was! Van stretched his neck as far as he could to watch her as she pattered

past. She was such a mite, and on one arm she carried a large basket, and over her, like a great big tent, she held an umbrella. It was so large that it took her two tiny hands to hold it steady, and so full of holes that the rain popped through and washed *her* little face too; but she didn't seem to mind a bit, and was quite proud of her burden.

Next there came a woman with two little children; very ragged and very wet; so tired and hungry-looking, too. Seeing a little face high up, peeping through the bars, they stopped beneath the window, and then the woman began to sing. It wasn't very pretty music, Van thought, it was too full of twirls and shakes and quavers. Perhaps the voice had been sweet and fresh once long ago, when the lips from which it came were red and smiling; but now it only seemed to make the rain worse, and the day darker and more dreary. The little troop soon saw that nothing was to be had from the one watcher

high up at the window, and drifted on, the children dragging weary limbs, and clinging to their mother's skirts.

For a little while the rain had the square all to itself, and having nobody to pelt, it grew tired of pattering on the leaves, and racing down the gutter, and consented to stop for a time, though the clouds still hung dark and heavy, as if to say, "Don't be too sure yet, we've got plenty more water up here." Van looked at them, and began to think of his Ulster. It was new, and ever so thick, and though he had put it on once or twice, he had never been able to prove quite for certain that the rain couldn't get through it. This was a capital chance. Of course Nurse would scold if she found out, but Nurse was at Islington, and, besides, he didn't mean to be good.

Just as he was hesitating whether to go round the corner in search of Punch and Judy, which was pretty sure to be there, or to visit a certain shop where a good many of his pence were spent, a sudden sound reached him. Music again, but very dif-

ferent music from the melancholy ballad-singers—music, and the tramp of many pairs of feet.

"What a lark!" cried Van, stretching his neck to see out. In another moment he had rushed downstairs, flung open the door, and stood upon the step.

What Van saw was two boys with dark and swarthy faces, one of whom was turning the handle of a creaking organ, out of which the music came; but that was not what attracted him. He had seen children like these—brown-skinned and dark-eyed, with strange dress and bright peacocks' feathers in their hats—before, and he knew that they came from a sunny country far away in the south. No, the best bit of this show was the monkeys—real live monkeys, such as might be seen in the Zoological Gardens any day, but dressed, as never monkey there was dressed, in cocked hat and plume, and coat with epaulets, and sash and sword-belt. One of them was going through certain exercises as Van appeared; the sword was drawn in his tiny hand. The other, seated on the

organ, was munching an apple, and holding out his other hand appealingly to the crowd of children who had followed the little procession. Van stood for a minute watching it all; then a sudden thought came to him.

Here were playmates a thousand times jollier than the tiresome book boys and girls, who were always found out and punished when they were naughty. Here was a fine chance of having some fun without anybody know-

ing anything about it. Simon and the maids were all downstairs; the house was as good as empty.

"Come here," he said, standing on the steps and beckoning. The boy leading the monkey understood the sign, and came up with a bright face, expecting a copper. "The other one, too," said Van. "Come along, I'll take care of you; don't be afraid."

It was a little time before the boys understood what he meant, but at last he got them into the lobby, and shut the door upon the little crowd of children outside, who looked sadly disappointed when the fine show disappeared.

"Come upstairs," Van whispered, "but be awfully quiet, or Simon will hear you and turn you out." He led the way on tiptoe, turning round very often to lay a finger on his lips, and warn the children to silence. The little musicians followed as quietly as their heavily-sandalled feet would let them, but at every step they left great, black, muddy marks on the white stair-cloth. The monkeys, too, grew frisky, and uttered

strange noises, and altogether Van felt rather uncomfortable till he had reached the nursery, and shut in his guests.

"What do you call *this* one?" said Van, pointing to his special favourite, the monkey with the cocked hat and plume.

"Jacquot," answered the monkey's little master, smiling, and showing a row of white teeth.

"Well," said Van, diving into his pockets, "make Jacquot do every single trick he knows, and I'll give you this," producing a bright new shilling.

It is not much use to try and describe the uproar that followed. The monkeys and the monkeys' masters soon forgot to be afraid. The bright, clean room, so full of comfort, seemed a wonderful place to the two dark-eyed southern children, used to hard ways of living and few pleasures.

Van opened drawers and bookcase, and flung heaps of his forgotten toys and bright coloured picture-books on the floor. He tried the cupboard, and dealt out biscuits and sugar to the monkeys, who scampered up

and down, grinning at him now from the mantelpiece, now from the bookcase-top, their busy little hands laying hold of everything they could reach. Just when the fun was at its height—when Jacquot was seated on the table, with Nurse's cap on his impudent head, and her spectacles on his nose—when Van was shouting with laughter at the sight, the door opened suddenly. In one instant Van came back from the funland where he had been wandering, as completely forgetful of Nurse as if Islington had been at the other side of the globe—came back to find Nurse's face very red and wrathful at the door.

The monkeys skipped to the top of the bookcase, and sat chattering and grinning at her; the little music-boys looked up with frightened faces from the heap of toys; Van stood as still as if he had been turned into a little image of stone. Nurse said never a word, but she looked dreadful things. Then with one quick step she went up to the Italian children. Van saw that her heavy hand was about to fall on them; that

wakened him up. "Don't, Nurse," he said, rushing up to her; "don't touch them! You may thrash me as much as ever you like. You may beat me dead, I don't care; but you shan't touch them! It was me that brought them; they didn't want to come, but I said I would be horrid, and I meant to be horrid to you, and you shan't touch them!" It was a very defiant little face that was lifted up to Nurse's.

The children, more used than Van to blows, rose hastily, and prepared to slink away.

"Ivan Valentine," said Nurse, in an awful tone that meant war to the knife, "go to your room this instant, and stay there till I come to you."

But Van never heeded. "Here," he said, taking up one toy after another, and thrusting it on the bewildered children—"take this, and this, and this. I'm awfully sorry you have to go, but I'll save up all my money, and buy a monkey like Jacquot, and I'll be an organ-boy, too, some day."

Nurse hurried the children out of the nursery with angry movements.

"Mary," she cried, looking over the banisters, "watch that the little thieves steal nothing."

"They're not thieves," cried Van, struggling violently, for Nurse had him by the shoulder now. "Let me go, I say! Let me go, or I'll *have* to strike you! I've forgotten something." He wriggled out of Nurse's hands, and flew downstairs. Mr. Valentine and a strange gentleman met the little procession.

"Here," cried Van, breathlessly, rushing up to Jacquot's master, "I said I'd give you my new shilling. Father, you say that gentlemen always pay when they've promised. And I thought I'd be too late. But I can't come to your dressing-room to-night, or be your cup-bearer, or anything, because I've got to be punished."

"Punished, eh?" said the stranger. "What mischief is this you have been about, youngster?"

"Are you the gentleman that took Father

away this afternoon?" said Van, looking earnestly at him.

"Yes," replied the stranger. "What of that?"

"Have you got any boys of your own at home?" he asked next.

"No, only little girls."

"I was sure of it," said Van, sadly. "Girls don't count; but if you *had* had any boys, you'd have known that they don't like to have their father taken away on Saturday, their *only* play-day."

"And that was how you got into a scrape, left all alone, was it?" said the gentleman, kindly, but with a funny smile at the corners of his mouth. "Well, I owe you some amends. I wonder now if Nurse could be mollified, and would let you off, if I went and asked her?"

"It's no use," said Van, mournfully, shaking his head. "When she says Ivan Valentine, I know it's all up; and, besides, the monkey had on her cap and spectacles. He burst out laughing at the remembrance.

"What do you mean?" said his father.

And then Van began a long, rambling account of his afternoon's adventures.

Mr. Valentine shook his head as he listened; but he took Van by the hand. "Well, come up, and let us see what can be done," he said.

Nurse was moving about the room with a red, angry face, trying to put things tidy.

"Van has been very naughty," said his father, but he is sorry, and he has come to ask you to forgive him this time."

"Well, sir," said Nurse, "since *you* ask it, we'll say no more about it; but as for mischief, I never saw a boy to equal him in all my born days."

It was not a very gracious pardon, but Van was only too glad to get off on any terms. "Father," he said, going downstairs very quietly at his side, "I tried for a whole hour to-day to be like him, and I thought I wouldn't try any more; but since I'm to have tea with you, I think I *will*."

CHAPTER III.

A "MEN-PARTY."

FOR about a week Van did try pretty hard. Nurse wore a long face yet, and the sight of her in a new cap—she never would put on the old one again—reminded him very vividly of his last piece of naughtiness, and helped him, when he was tempted to be cross and disobedient, to remember what the other Van would have done.

Mademoiselle never once wore the red flannel all those days, or cried when she looked at the picture in her locket. Instead, she told him wonderful stories of her old home in beautiful Paris, which made him wish he had been born a French boy, and quite determine that he would see all these things for himself one day.

Bright days came now. The sun shone merrily down on the London streets. Most mornings Van was to be found in the square garden, practising with his catapult, or spinning his top, or whittling at a stick, just as the fancy came to him at the moment; and, as most of us know, it is easier to be good and pleasant out in the open air, where the fresh wind blows away all the grumbles, than shut up within four walls.

Katie liked Van much better as a companion in the garden than when she took tea with him in his own home. For, though it was a great honour to sit at the top of the table and pour out the tea, it was rather an anxious task for the little housekeeper. There was no pleasing Van at those times. Either there was too much sugar or too little, and never just the right quantity of milk, and somehow

the cake managed to disappear while poor Katie was struggling with the heavy teapot. Out in the garden it was different. There she would follow him about with Augusta in her arms, or a story-book perhaps, and when Van was in a very good mood, he would read aloud one of her favourites to her, Cinderella, or Red Riding-hood, or one of Hans Ander-

sen's famous fairy tales. Katie had not that pleasure very often, however, for generally, before he had got very far, he would shut the book with a loud bang, and pitch it among the bushes, declaring that stories were rubbish, and only fit for girls. In proof of which he would call Trim, and

scamper off with him, leaving patient little Katie to search for her despised treasure.

One morning Van came bounding into the garden in high spirits, Trim yelping and barking at his heels.

"I say, Katie," he cried, turning a somersault on the grass, and landing at her feet, "something awfully jolly's going to happen. Guess!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Katie, opening two blue eyes very wide, and holding Augusta suspended by one arm. "I never could guess. Is your papa going to take you to the Zoo, or to the Crystal Palace?"

"*That's* nothing so very nice," said Van, contemptuously. "I go there often enough. No, you must guess again."

"Oh, I know now," said Katie, speaking eagerly, and clasping Augusta very tight. "You have found out where the monkey-boys live, and are going to see them. Oh, Van, *do* take me."

Van shook his head. He had thought of that plan on Sunday, when the clergyman was preaching. It had come into his head

all in a minute, while he was staring up at the angels in the painted window, and wondering if he should ever grow to be like the other Van. It was such a good thought. He would take the old tattered copy of "Peep" from the top shelf of the cupboard, and some brightly coloured texts, and he would teach Jacquot's little masters. That was just what the good little boys and girls always did in story-books. He was so full of this bright idea, that he fidgeted, and could hardly sit still till the people rose to go out, and he trod on a lady's dress, and pushed his way down the aisle, in his eagerness to overtake Katie and tell her.

But that had been a Sunday plan, and here was Wednesday, and all sorts of new projects had come between to knock that one out of Van's head.

"I do think you are rather stupid to-day, Katie," he said, feeling just the least little bit ashamed of himself. "I believe I'll have to tell you. Well, here goes. We're going to have a party at our house on Friday. What do you think of that?"

"Oh," said Katie, trying not to look disappointed. "A grown-up people's party, do you mean?"

"Why, of course. A gentlemen's dinner, you know, without any stupid ladies. We'll be all men together. Fourteen of us, counting Father and me."

"How funny!" cried Katie. "When we have parties, we always have ladies at them, and the covers are taken off the drawing-room chairs, and a big fire is lighted in the best bedroom. I like it, because I get my best frock on, and because Miss Prosser is too busy helping Mamma to give me any lessons. I don't like *very* much when the ladies come upstairs, except to see their dresses. And it's good for Augusta, you know. It teaches her manners, and then I can always keep her in the fashion," said the little mother, stroking dolly's fringe of hair.

"It must be just horrid, I should think," said Van, "and then they ask such a lot of questions. Now in our house it is quite different."

"I wish I had been your little sister, Van,

and then I might have been at the party too."

"Never mind, Katie," said Van, flinging himself down on the grass beside her. "When I grow up I mean to marry you, you know, and we'll have nothing but men-parties."

The evening before this great event, when Van was seated with his father at the window, he was very anxious to learn all about the guests who were expected next day.

He had got a little plan in his head, and he fidgeted about a good deal, and could not sit still. At last he said—

"Father, don't you think we'd be the better of one lady?—at least not a lady, perhaps, for she's not very big. Father, there's somebody I'd like ever so much to ask," he said, coaxingly, perching himself on the arm of the easy-chair. "May I?"

"Who are you thinking of?" said Mr. Valentine, mentally wondering whether Van intended Nurse or Mademoiselle to grace the table with her presence.

"Just wait half-a-second, and I'll bring her," Van answered; and before the words

were well spoken, he was flying across the square garden, and up the steps of the opposite house. "Please, I want Katie," he said to the astonished servant who replied to his loud ring, brushing past her, and going upstairs two or three steps at a time. Katie was seated in a corner of the big nursery before her doll's house, rocking a small white bundle in her arms.

"Oh, Van, you've waked the baby," she cried, reproachfully, "However shall I get her asleep again!"

"Rubbish!" said Van, roughly; "get your hat and come with me. I told you something splendid was going to happen!"

Katie put her baby very tenderly into the cradle, and got her hat obediently, and presently Mr. Valentine, looking out of the window, saw two small figures crossing the square—a fair-haired little girl in blue frock and pinafore, and a sturdy young gentlemen in velvet knickerbockers marching at her side.

"Here she is!" cried Van, triumphantly, flinging the dining-room door wide open.

"It's Katie, Father; and she likes gentlemen best too."

"Does she?" said Mr. Valentine, drawing shy little Katie to him; "she is a true daughter of Eve."

Katie glanced at the dinner-table. Eve was associated in her mind, and in Van's also, with an apple; but though the apple season was over, nuts and figs did just as well, as they both thought when they had each a well-filled plate before them.

On the day of the dinner-party, Mr. Valentine went to the city just as usual. He was also quite able to eat his breakfast, reading the *Times* all the while, rather to Van's astonishment, and not seeming to trouble himself at all, only stopping to say a word or two to Simon about the wine.

No one else was allowed to have as much peace, however. Mademoiselle found that her docile pupil had vanished, and in his room there had come a turbulent and restless spirit, who inked his copybook and his fingers and his nose, played ball with the dictionary, and told Mademoiselle to her face

that French was a language only fit for women and babies, and not for men!

"To think that thou shouldst be so wicked," said Mademoiselle, looking very near to weeping; "and it is to-morrow the day of the little *fête* to which I proposed to myself to invite thee."

"What *sort* of a *fête?*" said Van, in some anxiety, suspending his game. "Just tea alone with Madame Cornet, or a real jolly feed with lots of people at it?"

But Mademoiselle wore an injured air, and would not reply.

Nurse, too, began to think that there might be a worse visitor than even the black dog. "Ivan," she said at last, looking very severely over her spectacles, "if you don't stop that noise this very minute, you shall not go down to the party to-night."

"Well," said Van, pausing in the middle of a discordant shriek, and speaking in a very aggrieved tone, "I do think it's a horrid shame that nobody wants a boy. There's Cook, she's gone and locked the door of the kitchen, just because I helped to

switch the cream when she went to speak to the milkman; and Simon won't let me carry the bottles out of the cellar!"

"And quite right, too. If I hear of you being downstairs again without leave, I'll set you to learn 'Meddlesome Matty.'"

But the hint was quite enough for Van. He took his cap, and rushed out to seek his faithful little playmate in the square garden.

"Here, your Highness," he said, making Katie a very low bow, and presenting her with a great full-blown dandelion.

"I'll tell you if you love me," said Katie, sitting down on the grass, and beginning to pull off the petals, saying in her sweet little

voice, "Van loves me—a little—much—not at all." Then breaking off suddenly—"No, let's count what o'clock it is, and see if it is nearly time for the party. Oh, Van, *may* I bring Augusta? She won't take much room, and she never did see such a lot of gentlemen in her life!"

"Oh, well, if you like. I suppose you couldn't be happy without her."

"Do you think they're dressing now?" said Katie, anxiously, a minute later.

"I don't believe one of them has left his office yet. Men don't take half the time to dress that women do, though Father *does* fidget a pretty long time with his tie."

The business of dressing was rather a prolonged one in Van's own case, for though he had insisted on having his best suit laid out quite early in the day, he made so many excursions to door and window between the putting on of each article, that but for Nurse's threats his toilet might never have been completed.

At length Katie arrived, the daintiest of little rosebuds in white and pink, and the

children took their stand at the window to watch the arrivals.

"There's a cab," cried Van, excitedly, after a good many disappointments, as the sound of wheels was heard at the corner. "It's going to stop at No. 12. No, it isn't, it's coming here. Look, he's going to ring the bell. Oh, what an awfully fat old boy!" he exclaimed, irreverently, as the door was opened, and an elderly gentleman stepped out.

"Look what a shining place he's got on the top of his head," whispered Katie, leaning two elbows on the sill, and peeping down as the gentleman removed his hat. "How cold it must be to have no hair up there! He's just like the pictures of Mr. Punch."

"Here's another!" screamed Van, as a second cab came in sight. "*He's* thin enough, at any rate," he exclaimed, as the occupant stepped out. "I should think he'd be glad of a good dinner."

"Here's one walking!" he said, in a disappointed tone, a minute later, quite indignant at being defrauded of part of the show.

"He must be rather mean. Oh, Katie, wouldn't it be fun to pop something down. Look, he's standing just below. Wouldn't he jump!"

But Katie discouraged this idea, and Nurse was seated in the next room with the door open, so that altogether the plan was fraught with danger, and, if carried out, might have serious consequences.

The children watched till the last of the guests had arrived—Van counted them carefully—and then took their places at the banister, to watch them leave the drawing-room.

"There they come," cried Van, in a loud whisper, as the door was opened, and a confused murmuring of voices was heard.

Two little heads were pressed very close to the railing. Katie held Augusta very tight. "There's old Mr. Punch," she whispered. "Oh, how old he looks—ninety or a hundred, at least."

"That's the one that has no boys," said Van, pointing with his finger; "that one with the red whiskers. He's only got girls,

I know. Oh, there's Father," he cried, making frantic gestures to Mr. Valentine, who looked up and nodded. "Now come along," said Van, holding out his hand to his little companion, as the dining-room door shut in the last black coat.

The two little figures looked very small as they entered the large, well-lit room, and wound their way among the heavy pieces of furniture. To little Katie there was a sense of half awe, which was yet partly pleasure, in this room, so different from the drawing-room on the other side of the square.

Here there were no crimson satin chairs, looking as if they were blushing rosy-red to be found without their pinafores on, and standing all in a stiff, prim row. But though the sofas and couches were pushed about here and there, just as if they had walked across to talk to each other, the room had a cold feeling, as if nobody laughed in it, or sang gay songs, or thought pleasant things.

Katie wondered, as she stood under the bright chandelier, if the ladies and gentlemen on the walls—for there were many pictures

—did not find it rather dull and dreary; and were they glad, too, when there was a men-party, and all the lights were lit?

Van was not troubling himself about any such thoughts, though he was seldom enough in the room not to feel a little subdued on first entering it. But that feeling soon wore off. "Come and play catch," he cried. "Look, I'll give you ever so much start of me, because you're a girl."

Katie put Augusta in a snug corner of the sofa, and then followed a fine romp. Round the ottoman, behind the big sofa, under the tables, in and out they flew, Trim yelping and barking, and leaping over chairs and stools, till the chandelier jingled and shook, and Simon appeared at one door and Nurse at the other, and the two little culprits were caught and well scolded.

"To think I can't trust you out of my sight for five minutes," said Nurse, her cap-strings shaking. "Ivan Valentine, you're the very wickedest, most aggravating boy I ever knew, and you're teaching Miss Katie to be just as bad."

"Oh dear," sighed Van. "It's something inside me; I can't help it. It *makes* me do things."

Katie hung her head, and grew as pink as her frock; but just as they were resigning themselves to be carried off prisoners to the nursery, Simon—who did not like to see the children punished—appeared, bearing a tray with ices and biscuits, and Nurse was persuaded to retire.

"Take care, Katie," said Van; "it's awfully hot; it will burn you."

"I know better," Katie answered, pursing up her little mouth, and taking a very careful spoonful.

"That's my mother," said Van, suddenly, pointing with his spoon to a picture above him. "She went away a long time ago."

Katie twisted herself round on her seat. "I know," she said, nodding her head as she looked up at the fair and gentle lady; "she's an angel now, isn't she, Van, with wings and a white dress. You'll see her some day when you go up to Heaven."

"Well, I hope that will be a good while off

yet," Van answered, his mouth full of biscuit. You see Father would miss me, and I've a great lot to do before then."

Simon appeared just as Van had scraped up the very last spoonful of ice, and before he had time to brew any fresh mischief, and told the children to go downstairs.

Katie held Augusta very tight in one hand, and kept fast hold of Van with the other. Her little heart beat very fast as Van pushed open the door, and the noise of talking and the clink of glasses came out.

"Don't be funky," said Van, marching boldly in.

Katie gave one shy look, Mr. Valentine turned round and smiled, holding out an arm to her, and Augusta's foolish little mamma fled to this haven.

As for Van, he began at the bottom of the table and walked all round it, holding out his hand, and saying, "How do you do?" to each gentleman in turn in his very best style.

In some cases the guests were too busy discussing politics or city news to notice this friendly greeting; but "Mr. Punch" not

only took the extended hand, but drew Van in beside him.

"Well, youngster," he said, "and what is your name?"

"Ivan Valentine," Van answered, promptly, wondering when it would occur to anybody that he would like some fruit.

"And what do you think *my* name is? It's not nearly so long or so fine as yours."

"Mr. Punch" was on the point of Van's tongue, but he remembered in time. "I don't know," he said, examining all the little wrinkles that crossed and recrossed each other in his new friend's face.

"Think of the sweetest flower and the prettiest flower in all the garden, and then you will know."

"Are you Mr. Rose?" said Van, with sudden interest, looking earnestly at him. "I've heard Father speak of you, and *he* said the other day," nodding over at the gentleman who had only girls, "that Rose was getting decidedly overblown."

Mr. Rose laughed, but he also got rather red, and Van wondered for a minute if he

had said anything wrong; but next minute he was quite sure he hadn't, for Mr. Rose went on—

"And my little girl is called Lily Rose; isn't that a flowery name?"

"Have you a little girl?" said Van, in fresh wonder.

"Well, and why shouldn't I have a little girl?" said Mr. Rose, pinching Van's cheek.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Van, rather perplexed. "I thought perhaps she'd be grown up. Katie said she was sure you were ninety or a hundred," he added, with much candour; "but I didn't think you could be *quite* that."

"Not *quite*," said Mr. Rose, with a funny twinkle in his eyes.

"I used to think Nurse must be quite that at least; but I'm certain now she can't be. At any rate, her hair——" Van paused, and looked up at the shiny place on the top of Mr. Rose's head.

"Hasn't all walked away from the crown of her head," said Mr. Rose, helping him.

"Well, but it's grey. I tried very hard to

find out her age. I know she's got it written in her Bible, and once I said I'd look; but next time I got a chance, what do you think she had done? *She had gummed up the page!* Wasn't it dreadfully mean?"

"Van!" called Mr. Valentine, rather sharply, just at this moment. He had a suspicion that Van's chatter might be more candid than agreeable to his listeners. And Van, seeing Katie well employed with a knife and fork, obeyed at once.

"Well," said Van, at night, when all the gentlemen were gone, and little sleepy Katie had been carried across the square. "Well, Father, I do think men-parties are the very nicest things going, and I do wish you'd have one every night. And that Mr. Punch is the very best old gentleman I know. Look what he gave me!" he added, opening his hand, and disclosing a very hot and sticky half-crown.

"Who is Mr. Punch?" asked his father, reaching down his cap, in the act of going out to take his nightly turn and smoke in the square.

"Well, not Mr. Punch—Mr. Peony," said Van, leaning over the banister, and shouting with laughter at his own little joke.

And as Mr. Valentine sauntered slowly on in the dim starlight, he seemed to see a bright little face, and to hear that merry peal of laughter echoing along the silent streets.

CHAPTER IV.

DARK DAYS.

OH, how hot it was—how very hot! The sun blazed down upon the dusty gardens like a great, round, fierce eye, staring into every nook and cranny, and leaving not a scrap of shade anywhere.

The clouds, which are great travellers, and move much faster even than the winds, had all gone away somewhere else, and the sky was as blue as the sea on a midsummer day. Even the daisies, whose bright eyes are not generally afraid to meet the glances of the sun, hung their heads, just as if it were night-time instead of broad noon. Every one of those little drooping cups seemed to say—"Oh, dear sky, please send us a little water, we are so thirsty."

Everything was very silent. Even the birds found it too hot to sing, though all the hard work of the season was over, and one might have thought that the mother-birds who had got all the nursery anxieties off their minds, might have found time for a little cheerful trilling.

One nest Katie could see hanging from a tree in the garden, ragged, and tattered, and deserted. She remembered watching it in the spring-time.

First she had seen the busy young couple carrying bits of straw and twigs, and all sorts of odds and ends, up to the forked branch in the lime-tree, where they had fixed to begin their housekeeping.

By-and-by Van and she could see a yellow beak and a pair of bright eyes peeping over the edge of the nest, and they knew that the speckled eggs were lying snug and warm beneath the careful mother's outspread wings. Van had been long anxious to climb the tree and secure some of their treasures, but that was a forbidden amusement, and though his father very seldom made any rules, Van

knew that when he did they must be obeyed. For a little while Katie, standing on the balcony, could just make out certain little things bobbing up and down on the edge of the nest, which she knew must be the nestlings, their gaping bills open always for the worms which father or mother popped down these hungry throats.

But that was all over now. The fledglings had learned to use their wings, and had gone out into the wide world to earn their own living, and to sing their own little songs of thankfulness for the crumbs they picked up, and the sun that shone for them; and to Katie, too, the spring looked a long, long way off.

She was seated on the sill of the school-room window, with her feet resting on the

iron balcony, where stood two great green tubs, in which two rusty evergreens were trying to grow.

The red and white sun-blind, which stretched like a tent above Katie's head, shut out a little of the hot sun. It shut out the opposite houses too; but though Katie peeped once or twice below the awning, there was no sign of life in Van's house.

Van had no sun-blinds to his house, so perhaps that was why the Venetians were all close drawn.

Augusta lay unnoticed beside her mamma, with extended arms, very limp and sticky. It was quite too hot to keep up a conversation, especially when one had to make up both the questions and the answers.

But two people inside the room didn't think it too hot to talk. Van's Mademoiselle Cornet had come to pay a visit to Katie's Miss Prosser. Katie had watched her crossing the square. She had on a great white hat, like a big fungus, and held a large red umbrella over that; but Katie had been too languid and hot to move when Made-

moiselle came in fanning herself, and exclaiming—

"I die with *ennui* of this barbarous country! One day a wind to cut like a knife, the next a heat to suffocate!"

Katie leaned her head against the window-frame. Sometimes she listened to the strange words Mademoiselle used, and wondered why she didn't speak like other people. Sometimes the words seemed somehow to die away, and then it seemed to be the bird in the forsaken nest that spoke, telling Katie about the country,

where the breezes were not too tired to run little races, and come flying in one's face; and about a certain little stream that babbled under big trees, by whose banks the burdock leaves spread their wide umbrellas over the speedwell and the crowfoot.

Katie lifted her head and wondered; had she really seen that brooklet, and where did it flow? and was there not an old garden near it, and a

low white house, all covered with creepers? Then Mademoiselle's voice broke in—

"Figure to yourself my despair, Mademoiselle"—then her voice sank to a whisper, and the words "doctor" and "nurse" were

all that reached Katie. Was it the bird that said—"The little one goes to the Cottage, is it not so? and Ivan, he goes also."

The Cottage! That was where the stream was, to be sure. Yes, here it is rippling past, and singing, oh, so sweetly! And Katie takes her shoes and stockings off, and dips her feet into the cool brown water, and watches

the little eddying rings widen out, and it isn't hot any more, and London and Miss Prosser are far, far away.

"Poor dear!" says somebody, after a long time; "she's quite worn out with the heat, and no wonder," and there is Martha leaning over Katie, who lies on the little white bed in her own room, with the blinds all drawn up, and the window and door wide, and a cool little wind coming in.

"Have I been sleeping?" said Katie, getting wide awake all in a minute; "and oh, Martha, what was Miss Prosser saying about the Cottage, and Van, and me?"

"You're going to the Cottage sure enough, Miss Katie, and time too to leave this stifling place. Your mamma has just been here to tell me to pack your box all ready for to-morrow. And Van, he's to go too, now that his papa is so ill; though what we'll do with a great wild boy like that, is more than I can tell."

Katie sat up straight in bed, and rubbed the hair out of her eyes.

"Is Van's papa ill? is he *very* ill?" she asked, earnestly.

"Ill enough," Martha answered shortly, as she bustled about the room, laying out Katie's pink frock and sash, and shoes and stockings.

"Will he die, do you think?" said Katie, in a solemn voice; "will he die and go up to Heaven beside Van's mamma?"

"That's not for you or me to say, Miss Katie," Martha answered; "but he's a kind gentleman, is Mr. Valentine, and we'll hope he'll get better."

"Because you know," said Katie, slipping off her bed; "if he *does* die, Van will have to come and live with us, and I like him ever so much better than Jack."

"For shame!" cried Martha. "I'm ashamed of you, and the poor gentleman lying that ill, and Van crying his eyes out!"

"Is Van *crying?*" said Katie; and somehow that seemed to make everything clearer. That Van, who always said that it was only girls who cried, should have given in, made Mr. Valentine's illness seem something very

real and awful. Not a mere dying and going to Heaven, such as seemed, to Katie's simple fancy, the natural and happy lot of everybody who was grown up—was it not for that one must always try to be good?—but that Van should be left sorry and crying was quite another matter; and Katie would have run at once to comfort him, had she been allowed.

Van had indeed been crying, and very loudly too; but I'm afraid his tears came more from anger than from grief.

Only the night before, he had sat with his father, and everything had been just as usual, except that Father had a headache. But a headache presented itself to Van's imagination only as an excuse for lying down on the sofa, and having a little extra petting. At the very worst, it meant a dose out of a certain bottle, and a spoonful of jam as a reward for heroism in the taking of the draught. So his father's headache and his quietness did not trouble his son, who thought it the best joke in the world—after getting over his astonishment—to be allowed next

morning to carry a tray with tea and toast to his father's bedroom.

"I wish *I* might have breakfast in bed," he said, plumping the tray down and spilling the tea; "it's like a picnic."

"Father, you *do* look funny—just like the picture of Red Riding-hood's wolfy grandmother in Katie's book!"

But Mr. Valentine did not seem to appreciate the picnic. He swallowed the tea eagerly, but he would not touch the toast.

"Couldn't you eat just the least tiny little bit?" Van said. "I made it all by myself," looking at it rather longingly. "It *is* rather thick, perhaps, but I thought you'd be hungry. It seems such a pity to waste it."

"Eat it yourself, my boy," said Mr. Valentine, smiling languidly; and Van, nothing loath, obeyed.

"I know what will do you good," he said, when he had finished, jumping down off the bed; "I'll fan you. What shall I get to do it with?" he said, going slowly round the room. "The bath-towel won't do, nor the boot-jack, nor the clothes-brush. Your slipper

wouldn't give much air, would it, Father? Oh, here's a newspaper—but that's so crackly. The blotting-book *might* do," he said, returning from a vain search in the dressing-room; "the boards can bend back."

He quickly climbed back into his place, shaking the bed considerably as he settled himself. He began his task, and fanned diligently for a time, but the blotting-book was disappointing as to wind, and the boards were so heavy, that several times it was perilously near to falling upon Mr. Valentine's nose.

"I know," said Van, with a sudden bound that caused the springs to creak, and startled his father—"I have it now; bathing is the thing." Van fetched the great bath-sponge from the dressing-room, first dipping it in the bath which stood filled, but unused, and leaving a little watery track all over the carpet. "That's nice, isn't it?" he said in triumph, as he climbed carefully back to his place, and laid the great cool mass on Mr. Valentine's throbbing temples. His father opened his eyes, and smiled gratefully. It

was nice, till Van in his zeal gave the sponge a great squeeze, and sent the water trickling down Mr. Valentine's neck, and over the pillow. Van burst into a merry peal, but checked it suddenly when his father did not even seem to notice or to hear. "Oh, I didn't mean to," he said, penitently. "I'll get something in a minute to dry it up." Could Father really be angry? But before Van could repair the mischief he had done, Simon came in, and he was put out of the room so silently, and yet so firmly, that he forgot to rebel till the door was safely locked upon him.

That had happened two days ago, and since then he had never once seen his father. Nurse kept him away the rest of that day on one pretext or another. Van wondered why she should be so cross, and yet so kind. All sorts of forbidden pranks were allowed, so long as he only kept quiet. He might have coaxed her to any extent, but mischief had lost half its zest when it might be undertaken under Nurse's very eyes, and allowed to pass unnoticed.

Nurse was not really cross, though there were crumpled lines upon her brow, and though nothing that Van did made her smile. She was only very anxious—for Mr. Valentine was her boy too, in a way that Van could never understand. That Nurse should have been his father's nurse too, seemed to make her out to be as old as some of the people in the Old Testament; and as for his father having been a boy in jacket and trousers, and obeying Nurse as he had to do—Van gave up trying to take that idea in.

The first evening it seemed rather grand to sit in the dining-room all alone. He tried his father's easy-chair, and made-believe that he was grown-up and enjoying himself very much, but it wouldn't do. It was all queer and miserable without Daddy, and when Van could bear the solitude no longer, he stole out of the room, and crept back to the closed bedroom door, as he had done a dozen times before that day.

He tried the handle, but the key was turned in the lock. Van was sure there was

some strange person inside—some one who spoke constantly, in a strange, hoarse voice; talking, talking, and never stopping. "That isn't good for a headache, at any rate," he said, indignantly; "I could have been quieter than that."

He sat down upon the mat outside, and here Trim found him.

"Oh, Trim!" Van said, putting his arms round the shaggy neck, and looking into the brown eyes for comfort; "do you know what it is to have your heart just breaking into bits?"

Trim licked his master's face, and wagged his tail, and thumped it on the ground out of sympathy. He looked just as if he meant to say, "Don't be so downhearted, master." And indeed he did his best to cheer him, for he sat up and gave a paw, and that was one of his very latest accomplishments. Van and Katie's brother Jack, last time he was at home, had taught him it, after infinite trouble, and the expenditure of many biscuits. Van was very proud of this feat, and he laughed now to see Trim perform it

of his own accord, and for a time he forgot his own trouble, till that strange, hoarse voice came sounding out again from behind the closed door, and reminded him of it.

He rose, and tried to peep through the keyhole, but could see nothing. He would have been frightened, had he not known for certain that his father was somewhere behind that shut door. What were they doing to him?

"I *will* get in!" he cried suddenly, rattling

at the handle, and kicking at the panels. "It's a shame; it's a shame! I want to see Father."

All at once the door yielded to his grasp, so that he nearly fell in his fright, and a strange woman, looking very stern and angry, stood before him.

"I want my father," said Van, trying to push past her; "what are you doing to him?" Then Simon came from somewhere —Van never quite knew where—and carried him off, kicking and screaming and plunging, and locked him into his own room.

And so, while Katie was dreaming happy dreams in her own little bed of life at the Cottage, and holding a court among the flowers and cocks and hens, and all the farmyard creatures, Van was spending his passion on the walls of his bedroom, kicking the paint off with the toes of his boots, which was a less painful fashion of showing his rage than knocking his own head.

And Mr. Valentine had gone away into a country where no remembrance of his boy reached him; a country which is haunted

with dreadful dreams, and strange confused noises, and all sad and sorrowful things.

Nurse was strangely kind and gentle when she came to Van at last. She did not even scold when she saw the scratched and disfigured wall. She drew Van towards her, and bathed his tear-stained face, and then she told him very gently how ill his father was, and how this was the time for him to remember all the good resolves he had made, and to act upon them; to show himself a good, brave boy, who would be a help and comfort, and not a trouble only, to everybody, when there was such a big trouble in the house already.

Van did not cry this time. He had spent all his tears—besides, he would not cry before a woman. But he said to himself that he would try to be like that other Van; and oh, how pleased his father would be when he knew! Nor would he say his prayers aloud, and Nurse let him kneel alone, and use his own words as he asked for help to grow brave and patient.

But when she had tucked him in, and he

was quite sure he shouldn't sleep a wink, and wondered a little frightenedly whether that strange voice could reach him up here, Nurse whispered something to him that sent all these fears suddenly away.

And though the wonderful news about Katie and the Cottage made Van more sure than ever that he should not sleep, and, indeed, very anxious to rise and begin to pack at once, Nurse knew better.

She put the light very low, and shut the door, but Sleep got in somehow. For he knew that nine-year-old Van had had a good deal of trouble to bear that day, so he laid a soft hand on his eyelids, and led him into the pleasant land of dreams.

CHAPTER V.

ON A JOURNEY.

THERE were two very restless little people in the square next morning, who rose as soon as the sparrows began to chatter in the eaves, and they are not sluggards, as everyone knows.

In one house a little girl had stolen out of bed, and was standing with bare, rosy feet at an open drawer, anxiously choosing an outfit from a great bundle of tiny garments, while Miss Augusta sat—her hair in curl papers—with unwinking blue eyes, passively looking on. In the other, a restless spirit was wandering up and down, waking everyone who was not already up, and tormenting the whole household with questions.

"Are you sure everything's packed up, Nurse? Do just open the trunk; here's something I've forgotten," producing an oddly-shaped bundle wrapped in newspaper. "What a fatty it is! don't it look as if it would burst? I'll sit upon it till you lock it. Simon, when are you going to make the sandwiches? I hope you'll remember to put the butter on thick?"—varying these remarks with excited rushes to the window, to see if the cab was not yet in sight.

"Laddie, you'll drive me distracted," said Nurse, who was looking very grave; "come and take your breakfast this moment."

But the bread and butter didn't want to be eaten this morning; it would not go down Van's throat, though it generally disappeared fast enough. He laid his curly head down on the table. "I won't go away," he said; "who'll take care of Father? Poor old Dad! He'll miss me just awfully, I know, for he's got only me, and it's a horrid shame that I'm not allowed to see him."

"He wouldn't care to see you just now,"

said Nurse, carrying away the cups; "when he's better, you'll come back."

"But he *would* care," said Van, passionately. "He always does—and—and I just hate you, Nurse!"

Where had all last night's resolves flown away to? Surely it was Nurse who had grown patient and good, for she never said a word as Van escaped from the room, and took up his old station outside his father's door.

"Oh, Daddy, Daddy, it's all your fault!" he cried; "why did you get ill just when I meant to turn good?"

Van was a little comforted when he heard the sound of wheels, and then a loud peal. That must be the cab. Yes, sure enough it was, and there was Simon with the portmanteau. He changed his mind about going when he saw Katie and Martha seated within. Here was Nurse with her cap-strings flying, and Cook with a big parcel of sandwiches and a bottle of milk, and the maids behind, all ready to say good-bye. Van felt rather important as he shook hands all round.

When it came to Nurse's turn, he whispered—

"I didn't just mean that I hate you, you know; but if you don't take care of Father, I'll never speak to you again," and he submitted quietly to be kissed.

"Here we go!" he cried, bobbing up and down on the seat, as the cabman whipped up his horse. "Good-bye, everybody." He kept his head out of the window, nodding and shouting messages till the cab turned the corner, then suddenly, to Martha's indignation, he shouted to the man to stop.

"Here she is, here she is!" he cried excitedly, as Mademoiselle came panting and puffing into the middle of the road. Van eyed her rather distrustfully, for she had a book in her hand, and wished he hadn't stopped the cab. "If she thinks I'm going to take the old grammar with me, she's just mistaken," he said.

"Bonjour," said Mademoiselle; "I could not let thee go without saying farewell; see, I have brought thee a book full of beautiful

designs, that thou may'st not forget my instructions."

"Thank you," said Van, not very gratefully; "but I'm sure the other boy would like it a great deal better than me. Oh, I say! I left the dictionary out in the garden; won't it be a jolly mess by the time I come back!" Van lay back and shouted with laughter at Mademoiselle's uplifted hands and face of horror, as Martha, growing impatient, motioned the cabman on.

The station was good fun. Katie was rather frightened, everybody seemed to be in such a hurry, and to go pushing about. She clung to Martha, notwithstanding Van's assurances that he would take care of her. Van strutted up and down the platform, and made up his mind that he would be an engine-driver when he grew up, or a guard, with gold on his cap, as he watched the signal given, and the train glided silently out of the station.

Past tall houses with many windows, and sometimes people leaning out of them to watch the train. Over a bridge, with a

street running far below, where the people looked quite small and almost like toy people. Then right through an ancient churchyard, where the headstones were far too old and feeble to stand upright, and leaned against each other, and lay down upon the grass, which was the only green thing that tried to grow in this sad little spot. Then more houses, not standing close and straight, like soldiers all in a row, but straggling along anyhow; here a big one and there a little one—then two or three all holding hands, with bow windows, like very big eyes starting out of very small heads. Then the air grew clearer, and a pleasant scent crept in at the window, and went with them on their journey, and here at last was the real, sweet country, green fields and hedgerows — up which red and white roses clambered—and red-cheeked children, who had not got *their* roses in the hot London streets.

How fast it all whirled past! The trees looked as if they were running a race all in a row, and couldn't make up to each other;

the cows and horses whisked their tails, and away they went too.

Van and Katie rushed from one window to another, and shouted to each other, and trod on Martha's toes, till she grew very cross, and was glad nobody else had come into the carriage. Then it was time for the sandwiches, and it was Van's turn to be cross, when he found that Cook had forgotten the mustard.

"She did it on purpose, I know," he said. "Horrid old thing! Just because I took her mortar and pestle to pound clay in."

"And serve you right too," said Martha, whose feelings had been worked upon. "And which, if it had been me, I'd have shooken you well, too."

Van stared, and would not have been content with that if his mouth had not been occupied with a large bite at the moment; but before he had time to make any reply, the train slackened in speed, and a little white station came in sight.

"Blackhill," shouted the guard. Then doors were opened, and one or two people

got out, and Martha bustled with the parcels, and was sure something had been lost, and Augusta was almost left behind in the excitement of the moment. The train moved on, carrying other people to far-away towns, or quiet hidden country places, and left Martha and Katie and Van in a tangle of green trees and hedgerows. So still, oh! so still, after big, hot, noisy London.

"I know the way," said Katie, with two pink spots in her cheeks, and an eager light in her eyes. It was so nice for once to know something that Van did not know. She ran with light feet down the steps, and out into the lane. Van thrust his hands into his pockets; he was determined not to show too much surprise or pleasure, with Martha and Katie to triumph over him; but the boy nature inside of him couldn't help coming out at sight of banks to run up, and ditches to overleap; trees to climb, and the sweet piping of birds to imitate with his own little gift of voice.

Katie had to set him right after all, for, left to himself, he would have passed the

green gate half hidden under the quaint clipped yew, which looked just like the trees one buys in a toy-shop all ready packed in a box, with a flock of sheep to browse under them.

"Here's Briarfield," said Katie, with a great sigh of satisfaction; "and here's Aunt Hannah," running forward and clasping round the knees an old lady who was advancing down the walk.

Van was an auntless as well as a motherless boy; but when he saw that kind face beaming from beneath that snow-white cap-border, he thought it would be rather nice to have some one so smiling and pleasant to belong to one. So he said, as he pulled off his straw hat, and put out his hand,

"May I call you Aunt Hannah too?"

"That you may," said the old lady, giving him a hearty kiss, which somehow Van didn't mind. "And now, dears, come and have something to eat; little folks are always hungry, I know."

"Yes," said Van; "I feel just as if I could be cut in two. I'm all bones."

"Oh, Van!" cried Katie, "and you ate six sandwiches!"

"Not six—five and a-half," corrected Van, with an injured air.

What a feast there was, to be sure! Bread and butter, and hot new milk, and strawberries and cream, and in the centre a large cake. It would have been all perfect, but for one thing. Van did not bargain for two aunts, and here was an Aunt Jane, who wasn't a bit like Aunt Hannah, but who had funny little curls, and a big comb, and who sat as straight as if she had a rod fastened up her back. It wouldn't have been so bad if she had just sat, but she kept saying, "Don't stoop, children. Chins in. Elbows off the table. Not so fast, Catherine. One thing at a time, Ivan," till she seemed quite as aggravating as the clock on "black dog" days at home, or as Nurse and Mademoiselle and Cook and Simon all rolled into one.

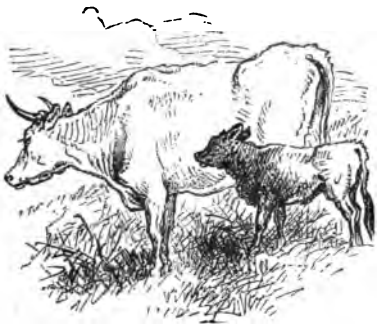
"Let them be, sister," Aunt Hannah said, nodding her head, and cutting fresh supplies of cake; "bairns will be bairns. Now run

out, dears, and play, and let Aunt Jane have her nap."

Could Aunt Jane lie down? Van wondered. She looked as if she had been made to sit, like Katie's china doll, that was all in a piece with its chair.

Everybody knows what a first day in the country is like—the wonders there are to see, and the pleasant things to do. Van was not content till he had jumped the fence, and made old Whitefoot's acquaintance. Whitefoot came up as if he were used to boys, and rather liked them. He put down his head, and let Van stroke his nose and pull his ears, and then snuffed about as if he expected a bit of sugar, and didn't see why it was not forthcoming. Daisy, who was feeding in the pond

field, didn't look quite so hospitable. She was a staid mother, with a frisky little calf to look after, and boys were very rough and ill-mannered, she felt sure. She had two horns like a little crescent moon, but oh, not half so soft! The sight of them determined Katie to keep on the garden side of the fence, and even Van made very cautious advances, when he found that Daisy was not to be tempted by the handful of grass he held out to her.



It was all a new, delightful world to the tired London children. Van thought of his father very often, and always with a longing to have him at his side; but *here*—not in the big city—for country pleasures had won the day. Surely everybody must like the country best; the very sun seemed sorry to leave it, and lingered on and on, far longer than in

the square. But, for sun and children too, bedtime comes at last.

"Katie," said Van, opening the door between his room and hers, and popping in a curly head; "Katie, Aunt Hannah's a brick, and the strawberries are jolly; but I'll *never* call the other one 'Aunt Jane.' That's the best of not having any *real* aunts—you can choose only the nice ones; but *you've* got to say 'Aunt Jane,' and you've got to obey her too!" And with this parting salute he closed the door, and took a flying leap right into the middle of his little white bed.

CHAPTER VI.

AT BRIARFIELD.

WHEN Van woke next morning, he couldn't make out for a minute where he was. He thought it must be a place in a dream, this funny little room with the low ceiling, and the bold red roses climbing up and peeping right in at the window. There were roses everywhere. Fairy roses running in a little pattern all over the curtains and chairs; giant roses in big bunches on the carpet; sweet hedge-roses twining round the basin, and clasping the water-jug. Van rubbed his eyes, and woke to the joyful remembrance that this was Briarfield, and neither a dream-room nor a story-book room; and there was Katie, fresh as any dew-

washed garden-flower, laughing slyly at the march she had stolen on lazy Van.

He tumbled into his clothes as fast as ever he could, and rushed out after Katie. He found her in the court-yard, seated on an old box. Katie would have made a pretty little picture just then, had anyone been quick enough and clever enough to paint her while she sat so still.

"Brownie remembers me," she said, as Van came near. She stroked the shining colours on the pigeon's neck, as the gentle creature nestled in her arms, and looked at Van with quick, bright eyes. "Last year there was Snowflake too, but he's dead. I wish I had been here to bury him! The others are just common birds, with no manners."

Brownie was an old indulged pet, and would have gone to any hand that held out

an inducement in the shape of grain; but Katie liked to think that her old playmate remembered her.

Briarfield was as good as a story-book place after all, there were so many new and unexpected things constantly turning up, and all of them pleasant things.

"You haven't seen the rabbits," said Katie, who was mistress of ceremonies; "look, Van, at the other side of the yard." There they were—black and white, brown and mouse-coloured. One had his nose right between the spars, and was peeping out of the hutch; another was standing on its hind legs to get a better look at Van. What pretty, soft, furry creatures they were!

"Will they eat corn?" Van demanded,

crossing over to Katie, and helping himself from her store.

"I don't know," Katie said, doubtfully; "but they like cabbage and lettuce and green stuff, and Aunt Hannah gives them bran, I know."

"Well, they ought to, stupid things," Van said, pelting them with the grain, and gleefully watching them scamper about.

"Good morning," cried Aunt Hannah, coming to the rescue of her pets. Aunt Hannah looked a dear, sweet old lady, notwithstanding her short skirts and stout shoes, and the big white sun-bonnet on her head, and somehow nobody felt inclined to be cross or unkind in her presence.

"Who is going to find the eggs for me?" she asked, holding up a basket.

"Me, me!" cried Katie, setting Brownie down gently, and shaking the grain from her lap.

"No, me," said Van, trying to seize the basket; "I'm the newest here, and girls should give in to boys."

"At Briarfield it is just the other way,"

said Aunt Hannah, gently, laying a hand on his curly head. "We teach the boys to be thoughtful and kind to all who are less strong and able than they are."

Van hung his head. His cheeks grew hot. Something had suddenly reminded him of the other Van.

"Katie shall go to-day, as she knows the old places. Show them all to Van, dear, and to-morrow he can gather the eggs," said Aunt Hannah, settling the little dispute.

Katie proved a clever little searcher, and looked in places which Van—who was not used to hen society—would never have dreamed of prying into. And Katie was generous, too, for she gave her treasures all up to Van, and let him have the honour and glory of carrying a well-filled cap to show to Aunt Hannah.

By the time all this was over, the day had grown quite old, and breakfast was set in the cool parlour, with the windows wide open to let the fresh breeze in, and Aunt Jane came

in with her little curls all tight and corkscrewy; "and there was an end of peace and comfort," said Van, with a tremendous sigh, as he went upstairs to wash the hands and face which she pronounced only fit for a ploughboy.

Nevertheless, Van managed to make a capital breakfast, and astonished Katie by the strength of his appetite.

After breakfast, the maid brought in a big Bible, and placed it before Aunt Hannah.

"Do you have prayers *every* day?" said Van, who was very curious and inquisitive. "*We* only have them on Sundays. Father reads them out of a book. Sometimes he reads the wrong one. I know it, because it's all about night and going to sleep and beginning a new day to-morrow, when it's only the morning, and there's twice to church and everything to come. He gets awfully red when he does that, and makes up bits. I know, for I've looked in the book."

But here Aunt Jane looked so dreadfully shocked, that Van stopped suddenly to gaze at her.

"We read each a verse in turn," said Aunt Hannah, gently, opening the Bible at a chapter in Jeremiah, which is full of long, hard names.

"What makes forty-eight, Van?" whispered Katie, in distress.

"An X and an L and a V and three I's," Van answered in a loud whisper, proud of his superior knowledge.

Aunt Hannah began. Van counted the row anxiously—Aunt Hannah, and Aunt Jane, and three maids, and Katie. Every seven times it would come to his turn. He began to con his own particular portion, not listening much to anyone else. This answered very well for a time, till a particularly hard verse fell to the lot of poor Katie, who utterly broke down, and hid a very shy and flushed face in her two hands.

"Go on, Van," said Aunt Jane.

Van could have shaken Katie. He stumbled through the verse, corrected at every second word by Aunt Jane, and felt as if everybody were looking at him. "Well, I'm glad *that's* over," he said, shutting his book

with a loud noise when the last word had been read. "Come and play, Katie; I feel all stiff and sore, as if the hard words had got inside of me!"

There was not much more sitting still for that morning, at least. Who could remain indoors, with so much to tempt one outside? Everything seemed to say to the children, "Come and enjoy," and *that* they were nothing loath to do. "Come and learn," it said too, but not in any words that they could understand, or they might not have gone so willingly.

Yes, Briarfield was a great book full of rare and wonderful knowledge; but the best of it was, that the lessons it taught came so silently and gently that the children never knew they were learning at all, while all the time they were laying up a store of pleasant memories to carry back to their homes in the square.

Pleasant teachers these, and happy lessons, that came in the breath of the sweet hay-laden air, in the scent of flowers, and song of birds, and the drowsy noontide hum of insects.

Van—whose holidays had been mostly spent by the sea—made the acquaintance of a vast number of the tiny creatures who live in the world beside us, hardly known to us, and yet having homes and ways, and wishes and fears of their own. "Look, he's playing at being dead," he said, poking his finger at a large spider that lay motionless in the centre of his gossamer net, waiting till this giant intruder should satisfy his curiosity. The web was spread in a shady bit of the hedge, where tired flies might be supposed to take a little rest. Tiny drops from last night's heavy dew glistened like diamond points on its airy surface. One poor victim had ceased to struggle, and was lying in the spider's larder, ready for dinner-time.

"Here's the tortoise!" cried Katie, in raptures, kneeling down to greet an old acquaintance.

"Old Slowcoach," as Van christened him,

had wakened up from his long, sound winter sleep in the warm earth. The birds had roused him in the spring-time with their merry singing, and now he had reached the hedge in his slow summer travels.

Katie crept through a gap in the hedge, and gathered a store of dandelion-leaves that might have lasted a week, had they not withered in the hot sunshine.

At noon, Joe, the stable-boy, appeared with a pail in the field where Daisy and her smaller Daisy fed. Katie rushed into the house for her own special jug, and the children had a draught of the warm, frothy milk. Katie was a great deal more sorry than Van, when Martha came out to insist upon the necessity of clean hands and faces and smooth hair before the early dinner-hour; for the mention of a meal was never unwelcome to a certain sturdy boy.

Martha found them playing by the ditch. Van had originated the idea of banking a part of it up to make a reservoir, and was not at all inconvenienced by the mud, with which he was plentifully bespattered.

Martha kept calling to the children, afraid to venture too near in her fresh, clean print.

"Coming in a minute," shouted Van, working away busily.

The one minute lengthened into several more. Then Martha ceased to call, and seemed to grow less impatient; but that was because Andrew the gardener had come to the other side of the gate, and was leaning over it talking to her.

"Is Andrew your lover, Martha? Are you going to marry him?" asked Van.

"My! how you startled me, child!" said Martha, tossing her head, as she hastened up the path.

"But what *were* you talking about?" Van continued; "did he give you a lock of his hair? Mademoiselle has got one, I know. Katie's going to marry me when she grows up." But Martha only went on the faster, and she was as cross as two sticks, he decided, and much horrider than Nurse. And wasn't he glad he wasn't a girl, to have his hair tugged!

The remembrance of Nurse brought other

thoughts of home, and, quickest of all, the recollection of his father. Was he sitting up and having his dinner? Van wondered, as a thought of his own appetite crossed him; and did he miss his little waiter and companion? A great longing to go back to the square seized Van; he had thoughts of beginning to pack up at once. Then he decided it would be a pity to go before dinner, and determined to tell Miss Hannah of his intention in the afternoon.

It was such a very grave and sober face that Van brought downstairs with him, that kind Aunt Hannah was sure he must be tired, and gave him an extra share of pudding to mend matters, and even Aunt Jane did not need to say more than once, "Little boys should listen and not speak." The meal over, Aunt Hannah proposed a quiet game indoors, and then Van suddenly disburdened himself.

"I'm going home," he said. "I've got enough money for my ticket," producing a number of coppers and some small pieces of silver, which he carefully sorted out from

a miscellaneous collection of marbles, old match-boxes, bits of string, &c. "This is a very nice place, and I like it ever so much; but I'm sure Father wants me, for he's got nobody else."

Aunt Hannah drew him towards her. She knew that the tears were not very far off; she could hear them in Van's voice, though he was too proud to shed them.

"I'm sure he does, dear; he misses you very much indeed; and I daresay at this moment he is thinking of his little boy. But I am quite sure, too, that he is saying, 'I hope Van is enjoying himself very much, and having good fun down at Briarfield, and that he is getting strong-limbed and brown-cheeked and hungry, and then what a famous messenger and nurse he will make by-and-by!'"

"Do you really think he is saying that?" Van asked earnestly; "because, you know, if he *wants* me to be here, that makes all the difference. I'll eat a great lot at tea-time. Once I ate seven rounds of bread and butter. I think I could manage eight

here; and then I ought to be strong, Aunt Hannah!"

"I think, in the meantime, you might do something better still," said Aunt Hannah, with a little smile. "Don't you think Father would like to have a letter from you?"

"Perhaps he would," Van answered, with a sigh. This was not quite such an agreeable way of testifying zeal.

But Aunt Hannah, after some searching, produced a sheet of paper with a print of Briarfield at the top, which made this quite different from an ordinary letter, and Van sat down to his task in a business-like fashion.

"I'll sit as still as a mouse," said Katie, looking up from her station on the carpet at Van making his preparations. "I've got Augusta to teach; she's a very backward little girl."

Van wrote Briarfield and the date at the top. They were squeezed into the corner, and looked as if they would like to get out of the sheet; but there they were, safely accomplished. "There's the first one!" he

exclaimed, as a great black drop plumped upon the picture, and spread like a dusky lake all over the lawn.

At last, after a great deal of squaring of his elbows, holding his head, and staring out of the window for ideas, the letter was finished.

"My dear father" (it began), "I hope you are better and that you will soon be all right and that you won't take ill again for a long time. I'm going to eat twice as much as ever, and I ran twelve times round the garden walk to-day without stopping and I mean to again to-morrow. Aunt Hannah is jolly and she gives us cakes and cream and so is Whitefoot and Daisy and the rabbits but the other one is horrid and I won't call her Aunt we had to say a peace of poetry if if we liked the name of the peace was the defence of the tuscan army and I got the prize but aunt hanah said it was not very well said and there is to be another prize and Mr. bishop is to give it he is a Gentleman of the village now I think I must stop and please have you any crests and stamps to send me.

"My love to Nurse and Simon and everybody from Ivan Valentine."

"I think Aunt Hannah's name has got another *n* in it," Katie ventured, as she spelt out the blotted scrawl; "but I daresay she won't care."

Van paid little attention to this criticism. He was in a great hurry to seal his letter, lest Aunt Jane should come in and spy out defaulting capitals, and deserters in the shape of missing letters. "I've licked all the gum off," he said; "do you think the postman will read it?"

That was a grand excuse to coax Aunt Hannah for a bit of sealing-wax. The next difficulty was a seal, for Van quite scorned the idea of using the end of Katie's thimble. Surely there never was such a troublesome letter as that one, or one that presented a finer appearance when at last it was pronounced complete, and the children had reluctantly consigned it to the box. Van and Katie made many excursions to the gate to see if the postman had forgotten to call. Van thought that letter never would

begin its journey. But at last it did. Then what a number of wonders and speculations went after it! What would Father be doing when it came? Would he be very much surprised, and not able to guess who had sent it? and whether would he like the "Je vous aime" on the one seal, or the forget-me-not on the other, best? Of course he would answer it at once, that was quite certain.

But Van's gay letter lay unheeded beside many others when it got to the house in the square. For Mr. Valentine had not come back yet from that far country to which he had wandered. Indeed, every day he seemed to be going farther and farther away from those who were round about him, and who, for the sake of one curly-headed, wild, yet warm-hearted little boy, would fain have kept him near them.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT A WET DAY BROUGHT.

RAINY days will come even in the country, where one expects nothing but sunshine.

In the night-time, when two little people were sound sleeping, some soft, mist-like vapours stole up out of the sea. Up, up they climbed into the sky, and presently they put the twinkling star-lamps out.

An old seaman, looking up into the silent heavens—which told him many of their secrets—said to himself, before he turned away and shut out the darkness, "Rain to-morrow to the north." Did the clouds hear him, that they went sailing northwards so swiftly and so silently? Through the dark

night they travelled, and just before the dawn they came to Briarfield.

"Here is a thirsty place," they said, looking down upon the burnt-up earth and sleeping flowers, and pouring out their treasures. That was a happy waking for the hot and weary land. The sun kept away that morning; he knew he was not wanted; but the birds sang, though the heavy drops trickled down into their nests, and rolled off their feathers, for a wet day meant a plentiful meal to those hungry little songsters.

It meant nothing half so pleasant to Van and Katie. Breakfast was to be had every morning, wet or dry—but what about play, with a little stream making a channel for itself down the middle of the garden walk?

Van listened all breakfast-time to the constant splash, splash of heavy drops from the verandah roof. He was unusually silent, revolving some plans of his own.

"I'm as glad as I can be," said Aunt Hannah, laying her basket of eggs down carefully; "now there is some hope of things taking a fresh start. Children, we'll have

to find something to amuse you indoors to-day."

But Van had no intention of remaining in. He watched his opportunity when Aunt Hannah was busy unpinning her skirts, and carefully spreading out her large umbrella to dry. He beckoned to Katie, and before Aunt Hannah could stop them, two little figures were flying across the lawn and down the walk, splashing through all the muddy places.

"Come back, come back!" cried Aunt Hannah; but the rain drowned her voice, or was it that the culprits did not wish to hear?

"Now, Katie!" shouted Van, tearing across the courtyard, "this way. There's the jolliest place here. I found it out only yesterday—and nobody ever comes near it."

Katie thought that must be true, when she looked at the steep ladder up which Van had already climbed half-way.

"Van, I *can't* get up there; my legs are too short," cried Katie, piteously, in a voice that sounded as if tears were not far off.

Van gave a great sigh. "It's a dreadful

trying thing to have a girl friend," he said; but he came down again, and gave Katie his hand. It was hard to climb, for several of the rungs were awanting, and there were wide gaps through which Katie could see the floor of the barn, with the cocks and hens scraping quite unconcernedly, as if it were nothing to them that a little girl was in danger every moment of falling on the top of them. Even Van was rather glad when they stood safely upon the floor of a wide, low-roofed loft. It was so quiet, and so far from everbody, and Martha certainly would not find them here.

"It is as good as a desert island," said Van, proudly, looking round on the big empty space. "We'll play at Robinson Crusoe, and I'll let you be Friday, Katie."

"Thank you, Van," said Katie, to whom this seemed a great act of condescension; "but there's nothing to play with."

"Oh, yes, there is—lots. Look at this heap of old boxes and hampers in this dark corner. "We'll make a house, and when it is night, we can go to bed in one of the boxes!"

"But—but don't you think we'll get hungry, Van; and, besides, they'll miss us," said Katie, in a doleful voice. Her shoes were wet, and she was feeling very damp and miserable, and did not enjoy the prospect of camping out all night.

"Oh, we'll get things to eat," said Van, encouragingly. "I'll hunt for you, Katie, never fear; and if I couldn't get anything else, there are the rabbits, you know. One of them would last us two days, and there are ever so many in the coop."

Katie let herself be consoled, and for a time the two played amicably—that is to say, Van invented and arranged everything, and Katie humbly obeyed. But by-and-by even this grew a little tiresome, and it was rather mortifying to think that nobody had missed them, or had troubled to come and look for them.

Then one or two guests, who had not found the ladder too hard to climb, appeared mysteriously. One of them was called Hunger, and it said very loudly indeed, "It's one o'clock, and Jane is laying the cloth for

dinner." The rabbit plan didn't seem quite so feasible now, for when Van proposed to go down to the hutch, Katie threw her pinafore over her head, and began to cry. Then Anger suddenly popped out from behind a chest where he had been hiding, and said—only it was Van's voice that it used—"You're just a big baby, Katie, and it's no fun playing with you. I've a great mind to go away home to dinner, and let you come down the ladder by yourself." Of course Katie cried the more at this, just as if she meant to rival the rain outside; and Van got so cross that he was about to fulfil his threat, and was preparing to lower the ladder, when voices were heard below.

"It is all that troublesome boy's fault," Martha was saying. "Miss Katie was as gentle as a lamb, I do assure you, Cook, before she took up with him. Miss Katie," she cried, "come down this very moment, or I'll write to your mamma to-night."

"I can't, Martha," sobbed Katie; "Van won't put the ladder down, and he's cross, and he's going to leave me here all by myself."

"Be quiet—I'll manage her," said Van, determined to make good terms before capitulating. "Martha," he said, peeping over the trap-door, "we'll never come down till you promise to go right away, you and Cook, to the house. And if you don't do that, we'll stay up here for ever and ever, and Katie will take cold, and perhaps die, and it will be all your fault; and what will her mamma say to you? She'll put you in prison—you know she will!"

Martha grew very angry when she found she could not reach the culprits, and she scolded a great deal, and threatened Van with all sorts of punishments. But Cook, who was a fat, good-natured person, managed better.

"Come away," she said to Martha, raising her voice so that it reached the children; "there's a tart and custard for dinner, and I know you're fond of that."

She was an artful woman, Cook! Tart and custard were better than dead raw rabbit—even Crusoe would have admitted that. "Come, Katie," said Van, quite gently,

when the steps had died away. He lowered the ladder with some difficulty, and helped her down very carefully. The ground was safely reached, and the two prepared for a sortie. The courtyard was quite empty and deserted, and Van made sure that the enemy was vanquished, and the coast clear. But I am bound to admit that Martha broke the terms of the treaty, and was lying in ambush behind the big pear-tree, ready to pounce on the children as they passed. Van escaped, but Katie was taken prisoner, and well shaken.

Indeed it was such a limp, forlorn, and tearful little Katie who was led in disgrace to Aunt Hannah, that that good lady had not the heart to scold, and lent all her energies to drying, and comforting, and cuddling the little culprit.

Van made his toilet, and came in looking so fresh and innocent, that there was nothing for it but to pardon him also; and that was the more easily done since Aunt Jane had a headache, and was lying down upstairs, and there was no one else to do the scolding.

The rain meant to make a day of it, that was certain.

"I'll give the flowers a good drink when I am here at any rate," it said; and so it kept falling diligently, washing the leaves, and bringing out the vivid green tints of the lawn.

But a wet day is rather trying for little folks, especially when they have "risen on the wrong side," as Van's nurse would have said; and everybody knows that when the morning begins badly, the whole day is apt to go wrong.

The children thought the hours lingered on that afternoon on purpose, just to tease them. First they played at being on board ship on the old sofa in the parlour, but the crew, consisting of Katie and Augusta, grew mutinous, and the captain took the pet. Then Van proposed a pillow fight, but Katie did not like that any better. Somehow the cushion always hit her, and it is not very amusing to feel that you may be half-blinded or knocked down at any minute, while the enemy ducks and bobs, and always escapes!

At last a bright idea struck Van, and he went out very softly to fetch his tool-box. Most boys are quite happy so long as they are allowed to make noise and litter enough, and for a time Van spent his energies in planning a great many fine bits of carpentry to be done some other day, and wasting a good many pieces of wood and nails. Suddenly, as his eye fell on Augusta lying limp and neglected, he was inspired with a new idea.

"Let us hang Augusta!" he cried; "won't it be fun to see the old thing dangling up there! I'll fetch the big hammer, and knock in a strong nail."

"But it will hurt her," said Katie, indignantly, taking up her ill-used child tenderly.

"Oh, not a bit," said Van. "She's got a very thick neck, and hanging doesn't hurt much. I'll tell you what it is, Katie; if you won't do as I tell you, I'll poke my awl into her, and bleed her. She's far too fat, and Martha says it's not genteel to be fat."

"Of the two evils, hanging seemed the least, and Katie reluctantly submitted.

"Everybody's got to die, you know," said Van, encouragingly; "and we might bury her in a pretty little grave in the garden."

Katie held the nail, while Van selected a spot on the wall, and lifted the heavy hammer with two hands. The burying

sounded tempting, and Augusta might be dug up again, if she didn't like it. Katie thought of the one or two deceased pets she had buried, and remembered how consoling it was to stick fresh flowers on the grave, and plant a bit of slate at the top for a

monument. Augusta should have a beautiful tombstone.

That was all very well, but in the meantime—while Augusta sat patiently awaiting her fate—the nail refused to stick in the plaster. It came tumbling out whenever the

string by which Augusta was to be suspended was attached to it.

"Here's a new place—we'll try this," said Van, crossing the room. "Let's get a nail with a sharp point." He raised the hammer, prepared to give a tremendous blow, when

something dreadful happened. The heavy mallet—too large for his small grasp—slipped as it descended, and came down on poor Katie's fingers. She screamed so loud that Van dropped the hammer in a fright, and he was both sorry and alarmed when Katie held up her hand, from which the blood was dropping, and cried as if her heart would break.

"I didn't mean to," said Van, penitently; "is it very bad to bear? Let me put my handkerchief round it. Look, Katie, if you'll only stop crying, I'll give you my new knife," he said, pulling the treasure out of his pocket, and eyeing it fondly. "It's only got one blade left—but it cuts splendidly."

But Katie was not to be consoled, and cried so bitterly that, as Van had feared, Aunt Hannah was attracted by the sound. Even her gentle face, which was usually all smiles, grew very grave as she glanced round the room, and noticed the disfigured walls and littered floor.

"I thought I could trust you," she said; "but I see that I cannot allow you out of

my sight." That was a great deal from Aunt Hannah; and though she said nothing more as she bound up Katie's fingers, and dried her eyes, the children felt that they were in disgrace. Katie would not come to tea at all, but hid her head among the sofa cushions in the dining-room, a big sob every now and then shaking her little figure.

It took a good deal to make Van go without his tea, but he sat unusually still and silent. He had an uncomfortable feeling that there was something else against him—he couldn't quite remember what—but it made the bread and honey taste less nice than usual. At last it came out.

"Who broke the melon-frame?" said Aunt Jane, with great brevity and severity, looking over the top of her glasses.

"I did," said Van, turning very red, and choking over a mouthful. "I'm very sorry; but I quite forgot to tell you yesterday."

"And was it you also who broke the stem of my lily?" Aunt Jane went on in a dreadfully calm tone.

"Well, I suppose it was me," said Van, desperately. "I don't remember—at least if it wasn't me, it was Satan inside of me. I can't help it, and I don't care—and I wish I was at home," he burst out incoherently, slipping from his chair, and rushing from the room.

"Now I put it to you, sister, if these children are to be allowed to destroy everything about the place, and to go unpunished. "*We* were very differently brought up; but I know that any interference on my part is in vain. If *I* had the responsibility, I should think it my duty to correct them, for their own welfare; but *of course* I am not listened to!" said Aunt Jane, with an injured air.

Katie was listening with all her ears. Would they really punish Van, and what dreadful thing would they do to him? A little voice spoke to Katie just then.

"It was *you* who broke the lily," it said; "it was very mean of you to let Van bear the blame, just because he does so many naughty things that he forgets."

Katie remembered now. Van had gone off on a butterfly hunt with his net yesterday; but Katie was hot, and stayed behind.

She watched Van from the drawing-room window, as he crossed the field, pausing every now and then, and advancing cautiously as some bright-winged creature flitted before

him. It was very tiresome to be left all alone, and Katie half-wished she had gone too. She wandered about the room, and then she espied the lily, and climbed upon the table to peep in at the yellow roll of fairies' butter standing up straight inside the tall white cup. All at once she leaned too far over, and the straight stem suddenly bent. Katie had propped it up again, and hoped it would stay, but the stupid thing had gone and died, and now Van was to be punished for it! Aunt Hannah had said she would punish him, and Aunt Hannah always kept her word.

"Go and tell," said the Voice. "No, stay here," Katie answered, as she peeped up from her corner when Aunt Hannah rose to leave the room. Just at the door she met Martha carrying a letter, and she paused to open and read it.

"Poor child! poor child!" she said, after what seemed a long silence; "he'll need all the love and tenderness he can get. Read that, Jane; I shouldn't wonder if it is all over by this time."

What did it mean? Katie wondered. What was over? and why must everybody love Van, who was so often naughty? But nobody told Katie anything, though she wondered more and more when she woke up suddenly in the night, and heard the sound of stifled sobbing coming from the next room, and then Aunt Hannah's voice speaking low and gently. Was Van being punished?

No. Van's naughtiness had quite gone out of his head, and everybody else had forgotten it too, for something very sad and sorrowful seemed about to happen far away in the house in the square. Katie turned her sleepy little head upon the pillow, and lapsed into a dream; but dreams kept away from Van, as he sobbed out into the darkness—

"Oh, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy! don't go and leave me!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A PICNIC OF TWO.

THE children were to have a picnic. That was what Aunt Hannah proposed a day or two afterwards, for the postman had carried better tidings one day in his bag, when he came striding down the hill, and found an anxious little group awaiting him at the gate under the clipped yew.

You would almost have thought that the postman was glad too about Mr. Valentine, when he saw Aunt Hannah's face brighten as she read the letter. Aunt Hannah's hand slipped slyly into her pocket, and presently the postman's fingers closed over something. Was that why he smiled and touched his hat, as he went away to carry other bits of

news, good and bad, to the houses in the village?

"What did you give him?" asked Van, curious and inquisitive. "It's not Christmas time? is it his birthday?"

"No," said Aunt Hannah, laying a hand on the curly head; "but it is a happy day

all the same, dear, and you and Katie must have a holiday."

As if every day at Briarfield were not a holiday! Except Sunday, indeed, Van would have said, when Katie and he had to learn the collect for the day. Katie took the top

walk of the garden for her schoolroom at these times, and looked a very prim, staid little Katie in her Sunday frock and sash. Van generally chose the forked bough of the chestnut tree, and did his best to distract the attention of one sober little scholar.

But Sunday was two days off upon one side of the week, and three days upon the other, which was a very satisfactory state of matters to the two small holiday-makers. Van was quite ready to enter into the picnic plan, and made a great many suggestions to Aunt Hannah about the preparations; but to her surprise, and to Katie's, he would not hear of the children from the doctor's house being added to the party. A picnic of two was quite enough, and he would have no one but Katie. Katie liked that best too, and made up her mind to leave Augusta at home.

Fine days do not always come just when they are wanted, but the sun consented to shine for these two little people. There was a great deal to be done before the picnic, however. There were the fowls, and pigeons,

and rabbits to feed, and the garden plots—which had been given to them—to water and put in order. Joe's little brother came with his barrow to help in this task, and to carry away the weeds and dead leaves. Katie's garden never seemed to flourish, somehow. It always looked a sickly garden, as if it

didn't get sun enough or rain enough to feed on. Perhaps it was because Katie pulled them up so often, to see if the roots were growing, that her flowers looked so drooping and tired.

The hours crept away very silently through the night, and the picnic day

dawned bright and sunny, just as a summer day should. Van and Katie did not catch the sun napping. He was wide awake, and busy turning the dew on the grass blades into silver by the time one little night-gowned figure had gone to the window. The same figure stole presently on tiptoe into the next room to waken some one else, who lay with tumbled curls and rosy red cheeks.

"Get up," said Van in a loud whisper, treading softly past Martha's bed. "I've got the sponge all full of water, and I can't hold it another minute, it does so want to wash your face. There, I told you!" as a little trickle of water ran down Katie's face and neck.

A big sigh, and then she opens a pair of wide blue eyes, and sits up with a yawn and a laugh.

"Are you *sure* she's sleeping?" Van points to Martha. "Wouldn't I like to astonish her!" brandishing his sponge.

"Yes, she's quite sound," said Katie, after a careful examination of Martha's figure;

"don't you hear her? When I was a little girl, I used to think it was a bear, and I was so frightened! But who'll tie my strings?" she asked in a doleful voice, looking up from the floor, where she was slowly pulling on a sock, as Van prepared to steal back to his own room.

"I will, of course. Just you come to me. I can tie such a tight knot, that nobody can undo it."

And that was how it was that, when the sun got round to Martha's bed and wakened her, the neighbouring bed was empty. Drawers and boxes were open, brushes and boots lay about the floor, but no children were there. Martha looked under the beds, and into the cupboard, and out of the window, but the birds did not tell her the secret, or, if they did, Martha did not understand their language.

"And please, ma'am, Miss Katie's best Sunday hat is gone, and her second best boots, that her mamma brought her from Paris two years ago, which wasn't my fault, please."

But Aunt Hannah only smiled. The basket that had been packed the night before with the sandwiches and cakes was gone too, and she had a pretty shrewd guess where the second best boots had carried one little pair of feet to.

How pleasant it was in the early morning freshness, when the day was all clean and new, with hours and hours of pleasure yet to come! The world lay all before the children, and it seemed to be theirs alone, for the field paths and the white lanes were quite silent, and here and there a house in the village had still its nightcap on, as Katie called it, when she saw the blinds drawn close, and the front door shut. The birds and the children had the lanes to themselves; but at the farmhouses the people were stirring and preparing—not for a picnic day, but for a working day. In the yards the horses were stamping impatient feet; the cows turned round to greet the dairymaid, as they heard the clanking of the pail; on the roofs the pigeons were dressing their feathers in the sun.

Van slung the basket on his back, and the two went hand-in-hand, happy as the sweet-voiced bird that sang its morning song on the tree branch, while they paused to listen.

"Let's be a prince and a princess," said Katie, to whom all fairy lore was dear; and then they fell back on that old store which is the nursery food of children in all time. And Van was Cornish Jack, who climbed the

Mount, and braved Giant Cormoran in his own castle.

What a noise his horn made in the still air! and how gruff his voice was when he acted the part of the giant striding out to meet Jack! And what a trembling, frightened princess Katie made, when Jack reached Blunderbore's enchanted castle, and found the poor ladies tied by their hair!

Then Katie ceased to be a little London girl, and was turned into that inquisitive little maiden called Silverhair, who was so curious about the Bears' house, and who supped their porridge. Then it was gentle Cinderella who walked the field-paths with giant-killing Jack—and then again that other princess, who had eleven wild swans for her brothers. And so, with these and many other familiar friends to go with them, the miles sped fast, and home lay far behind.

"The nut-field is a very long time coming. I don't think we ever came this way to it before. I'm almost sure we've missed it," said Katie, coming back from fairyland,

and suddenly remembering that she was only a tired and hungry little girl after all.

"Here is a place to pitch our camp," Van said, following a trickling sound, and running down the meadow slope, shorn now of its sweet burden of hay. Under a tangle of green things the streamlet ran. Meadow-sweet was there, white and feathery, and forget-me-nots, that stole their colour from the skies. Katie flung herself down on this soft couch. The grasses rose up, tall and soldier-like, all round her, and nodded their heads and whispered to each other. Was this the brook on which the little maid made her voyage on the acanthus leaf? she was wondering. Just here, in this quiet, still corner, the Toad might have kept house and guarded his treasure, till the fishes came and nibbled at the leaf-stem, setting it free to float down stream.

"Do you want any pie?" Van's voice broke in on her thoughts; "because, if you do, you'd better look sharp—I feel as hungry as six girls."

"Of course I do," and Katie rescued a tart. "Aunt Hannah says you should always say, 'ladies first'—and oh, Van! we should have begun with the bread and butter, and kept the jammy pieces to the last!"

"Never mind. I daresay we'll be hungry again before we get home, or else they'd do for to-morrow."

"To-morrow we'll have new ones. It's baking-day, and I'm going to make a little tiny loaf all by myself for Augusta."

But Van was not listening. He was looking far away across the meadows, to a place where the green of the woods and fields seemed to melt into blue, and sky and earth to meet.

"We're going over there," he said, with a wave of his hand in the direction in which he was gazing.

"Where?" asked Katie, springing up and coming to his side. "To the nut-field that way?"

"Bother the old nut-field! I never meant to go there," said Van; "we're going right away as far as ever you can see—and it's a

good bit of a way; so you'd better finish off eating as quick as you can."

"But where to?" Katie persisted—"that's not the way to Briarfield, is it?"

"Of course not, stupid," Van answered, impatiently; "we're not going back to Briarfield any more at all—*we've run away!*"

"Oh, Van!" and there Katie paused, struggling between admiration for Van's boldness, and a strong inclination to cry. She looked at him so solemnly, and so long, that he burst out laughing.

"Come along," he said, holding out his hand. "I'll take care of you, and tell you stories, and help you over the hard places, and we'll get to London to-night. There's lots of time left—and I don't think it's many more miles."

"To London! Then we'd better take our crusts, for boys and girls often starve there, I know." Katie gave a sigh as she thought of baking-day at Briarfield. But partly because she was rather proud of being Van's companion in this great adventure, and partly because he was really kind and careful, and

told her the stories he had promised, and gathered flowers for her, she made no more objections, and forgot for a little to feel frightened, or even tired. What Van proposed or did was generally right to his little companion; and though London did not seem a very cheerful place after Briarfield, still Van's papa was there, and Van had made up his mind that he couldn't live another day without his father.

"You see, if we'd run right away from home, there would have been such a bother and fuss; and now nobody will ever guess where we are—and that's why I wouldn't have anybody but you for the picnic, Katie," he said, letting out all his plans.

"Did you mean to run away, then, Van?"

"Well, not quite; but I thought it would be best to be ready, in case it came into my head again, you know."

Katie felt that it was all very nice, but she secretly wished she had brought Augusta. She would have liked the fun of running away, too; and now she would be so lonely!

Hand in hand the two little travellers

wandered on, while the busy sun was painting the waving grain-fields a deeper gold. In the villages, people were at work. The children paused now and then to look at this and that with curious eyes—the blacksmith's shop, so deep and black, with the clanking noise, and the red showers of sparks—the carpenter's shed, where Katie decked herself with the curly shavings. At one place a boy was pumping water for his little sister, who held a great jar under the spout. They looked so busy and so important, that the children lingered a long time watching them. At last Katie summoned courage to ask for

a draught of the cool, clear water, and the boy fetched a mug for her from a cottage close by.

"How far is it to London?" Van asked, as he gave back the cup.

The boy stared. "Dunno," he said, going on with his pumping.

"Were you never in London, little boy?" Katie asked, her blue eyes big with surprise. "We live there—we're going there now."

That there should be somebody in the world who had never seen London seemed a wonderful thing; and Katie thought about it a good deal as she trudged on at Van's side.

"Do you think we'll get there pretty soon now?" she asked very often; and Van always said yes—just round another corner, and he was sure they must come within sight of houses, or at least of a railway. But the road ran very straight, and the corners were a long time in coming. At every bend and turn Katie hoped on, but the roofs and chimneys she looked for never came in sight, and no sound of a railway whistle

broke the silence of the fields. At last her little stock of courage began to melt away. Her feet stumbled on the stones—the Paris boots were not made for such rough paths, and hurt her feet—and the remembrance of her little white bed at Briarfield, and the cosy supper in Aunt Hannah's parlour, put the finishing touch to her troubles. Van, too, was strangely silent. The tongue that usually wagged all day long, seemed to have no more words ready. He led the way through an open gate into a field, and they sat down upon the sloping bank. Katie buried her head in the grass, and cried quietly. Van flung himself down beside her, and tried to comfort her, and by-and-by she ceased to sob, and grew quite quiet, and Van, peeping below her hat, saw that she had fallen asleep. He was quite sure that *he* couldn't sleep, and kept staring up into the sky, watching the white cloud-islands floating about in the blue upper sea. But presently, while he was still quite sure that he would keep awake to take care of Katie, the lids stole quietly over his eyes, and the

sky pictures were blotted out. And all the time, while they slept, the sun was marching slowly, slowly towards the west; the wind had wakened up and shook the barley, and the shadows crept out, and began to steal about. Suddenly Katie woke, and sat up straight. At first she thought she was back at Briarfield—then she remembered everything.

"Van!" she called in a frightened voice—and Van, too, sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Oh, Van! do look at the sun—what is it going to do?"

The great red ball hung straight before them. Slowly—slowly, as they looked, it began to sink behind the distant hedgerows—it grew less and less, till at last there was only a little red streak left, and presently that too went out, and the flush in the sky began to fade.

"Do you think we're lost?" Katie asked in an awestruck voice; but Van only sat staring before him at the point where the sun had vanished.

"Katie," he said at last, turning and look-

ing gravely at her; "don't you think we'd better say our prayers?"

Katie slipped her hand into his, and the

two knelt upon the grass. Van said, "Our Father," and Katie too whispered out her little petitions, and after that she didn't feel nearly so afraid.

Van had quite given up the thought of reaching London, or even of trying to find his way back to Briarfield; but he was quite sure now that some one would come and find them, for he had put that wish in his prayer.

"But we'd better go a little nearer the road," he said, "for they might pass the gate, and be a long time finding us."

So they rose once more, and trudged on in the soft grey light, and Katie never once said how much her boots hurt her, or how tired she was, because she too was quite sure now that they would be found and taken home, and it was easy to be brave with that in view.

But it was a difficult matter to find just the right place to wait in. The roadside would not do, for the wrong person might pass by and find them there, and in some of the fields there were cattle, and others were shut by high-barred gates.

At last they came to a spot a little way from the high-road, and yet so easily seen that nobody could miss it. It was a little mound, on which some trees grew, and from which there was a view to be had of all the country round. Here they sat down to wait; but first Van spread out all that was left of their little feast, giving Katie the largest share. Then he chose a smooth stone for a pillow, and spread his handkerchief and Katie's on it, and made her lie down to rest, while he kept watch. At first, every time

the wind rustled in the trees, he thought it was a footstep, and started and turned to see; but nobody and nothing came except a bat, that wheeled silently past. Now and then a leaf fluttered softly down, or a wakeful bird chirped a note or two.

"Are you sleeping?" Van asked gently, after what seemed a long, long silence.

"No," answered Katie, striving to keep the tears out of her voice; "I was just wondering what Augusta is feeling like."

The next time Van put the same question, there was no answer. Katie had forgotten all her troubles, and was dreaming she was

making Augusta's little loaf. Van kept faithful watch; he tried to count the twinkling stars that had begun their silent life up in the sky, but they came out too fast. There was a moon, too, somewhere, shining behind the thin clouds, and making a white patch just where he lay. He began to feel very lonely, now that Katie slept. He wondered, would nobody come after all, and would they be left to starve like those children in the wood long ago, and be covered up with leaves by the birds? He had not thought of any such ending to the picnic-day, and for the first time he began to wonder if it were quite right to run away without telling, even if one had a sick father to run to.

But just as this uncomfortable thought made him more afraid than he had been all day, the first strange sound broke the stillness. He started up and went to the edge of the mound. Yes, that must be the sound of wheels. His heart beat faster than it had done when he lay under the trees, for he was quite certain now that the messengers had come.

And he was right, for into the dim light there came the form of a horse, and in another minute he saw that it was old Whitefoot, with Andrew driving him, and somebody else inside the cart.

"Here! this way!" he shouted, waking up the echoes. "I knew we'd be found—I was quite sure of it!"

Whitefoot stood still under the trees, and two people came up, talking and questioning. Katie awoke with a great start, to find herself in Martha's arms, kissed one moment, and scolded the next. As to Van, Martha had not a word for him, and would not even look at him; he was much too deeply in disgrace. But Van did not care. He got up beside Andrew, and held the whip, and chattered all the way, as if he meant to make up for his silence in the afternoon. The strange night-drive looked wonderfully short, and before he knew where they were, the lights at Briarfield were shining out, and there was Aunt Hannah herself, with a big shawl tied round her head, standing at the gate.

One would have thought, from the way she took the children to her arms and made of them, that they had done something very good and clever, instead of being a trouble and anxiety to everybody; but Aunt Hannah only remembered to be thankful that she had them back once more, safe and unharmed, under her care.

So when Aunt Jane came down, looking very severe, and with "punishment" written all over her face, Aunt Hannah said quite gently, "Not to-night, sister—we must have no scoldings to-night—to-morrow they will understand it better."

But when Van and Katie had had their feet bathed in hot water, and a pleasant supper in Aunt Hannah's room, and were safely tucked in bed, Van just managed to say before his eyes closed—"It was my fault, and I'm sorry; but I didn't think running away would be so horrid—and I did so want to see Father!"

CHAPTER IX.

A SURPRISE.

"I CRIED a lot, but Van didn't—at least the tears all ran down inside. You felt chokey, didn't you, Van?"

It was about noon on the day after the picnic, and Katie was perched on Aunt Hannah's knee, but Van sat on the floor a good way off—not anywhere within reach of a hand that was fond of patting his curly head. He looked as if the tears were lurking somewhere within reach just then, wherever they had been yesterday.

"The Prodigal didn't get punished," he said at last, in a sulky tone; "he got a new dress, and a whole calf to himself; and I don't see why we shouldn't have any pudding or fruit for a whole week. I said I was

sorry, too, and you didn't, Katie; and yet you are not to get any more punishment than me."

Aunt Hannah sat silent. They had been having a talk about the day before, and she had tried to show the children where they had been wrong, and tried, too, though it went against her kind heart, to punish them in some way that they should remember. Van knew now by her silence that he had grieved her. She did not like to hear him speak in that tone of the sweet old story, which is such a comfort to everyone who has sinned, and is sorry; and, besides, she knew —and Van knew it too—that it was he who had persuaded Katie.

But Aunt Hannah knew when to stop. She felt that to be always scolding is just as bad as never to scold at all. So she took no notice of Van's speech, but said pleasantly—

"Something happened yesterday when you were away. Can you guess what? We have got a new family in the yard. Speckle has come back with a whole brood of ducklings. You should see how queer she looks! She

can't make out why her children are different from the other mothers'."

Katie slipped from her seat at this news, and rushed to the door. Even Van's sulks were not proof against it, and he followed more slowly. The sight of the little yellow puff balls, or the company of his pets, seemed to do him good. Anyhow, when he returned to the early dinner, the "black dog" look was gone. He sat quite still, and never said a word while Aunt Jane ate her pudding, and a whole plateful of gooseberries; but he did think she might have been a little quicker about it, the gooseberries looked so plump and ripe!

Yesterday's adventure gave the children a great deal to talk about. Katie wondered very often how the boy at the pump could have guessed which way they would take, when Martha met and asked him. Surely he couldn't be so very stupid after all, though he had never been to London.

No further escapades followed on this one, for every day brought better news of Mr. Valentine's progress; and it was not so hard

to be patient, now that it was quite certain things were going to be the same as before in the house in the square. One day an answer came to Van's forgotten letter, which had really gone upon its journey, and had not been kept back by the postman, as he had indignantly supposed. It was not very long,

but it had one piece of news that set Van wondering.

"When you come back here (it said), and when Nurse will let me out of her hands, we'll go away together to a quiet place I know of, where there are mountains taller than any you have ever dreamed of, and great

sheets of water like inland seas. And you shall learn to fish, and to row, and to swim, and we'll lie out all day in the heather, and grow as brown and as strong as two Red Indians."

And at the bottom of the sheet there was a little drawing of this wonderful place, with high sharp peaks reaching up to the sky, and birds flying over the great smooth lake. Katie tried very hard to be as pleased with this letter as Van was. She listened to it with fresh interest as often as he chose to read it—and that was pretty often—and she was very proud of the little message to herself at the end; but she could not help feeling just a little envious, and wishing she might go too.

"You should have been a boy, Augusta," she said, shaking her head at dolly. "Why did they make you a girl? There are such lots of things Mamma says it isn't proper for girls to do; but boys may always do everything. Never mind, though, I love you a great deal more just as you are," she added, fearing she had wounded Augusta's feelings.

And so the puddingless week passed away, with no greater piece of mischief in it than the breakage of one window, to which Van promptly confessed, and for which he offered to pay with his Christmas money. And at the end of eight "meaty" days, as he called them, Van felt that he should welcome even the despised rice and milk, which caused such rebellion at home. But Aunt Hannah knew better than that what children liked; she and Cook laid their heads together, and prepared so many surprises, that Aunt Jane declared it was enough to tempt children to be naughty, if that was how they were punished.

"No," said Aunt Hannah; "but I hope it will help them to remember how pleasant it is to be forgiven, and how whole-hearted forgiveness ought to be."

Van looked up at that. It made him think of the beautiful Prodigal story in quite a new way. "Aunt Hannah," he said, pausing with the spoon in his hand, "I think the other Van must have been very like you."

"I want some more cream," said Aunt Hannah one morning, coming into the yard where a great family of fowls and pigeons were having their breakfast doled out to them; "Daisy has been stinting us of late—who will go to Mr. Bishop's for me?"

Two volunteers immediately started up, causing a flutter and scramble among the feathered creatures.

"I'll go"—"And I."

"Aunt Hannah—do look at that old Jemima. She grabs every single mouthful —greedy old thing!"

"Just see Trot and Waggle, Auntie! Aren't they darlings? I do wish their mother would let them be grown up; she keeps them down so."

"I like Tufty best, she's got such a handsome face, and doesn't she lay jolly big eggs! Come on, Katie, here's the pail. I wonder if Mr. Bishop will offer us another prize? I'll say 'The Defence of the Tuscan Army' if he does."

"Why, you said that last time, Van!

that wouldn't be fair," cried Katie, indignantly.

"Oh yes, it would. Nurse says my memory is like a sieve, and if things *will* run out at the other side, I can't know them, can I? Besides, he's sure to have forgotten —old people always do."

"But it would be wrong," persisted Katie.

"I'll try you a race to the gate," shouted Van, not finding it convenient to answer this statement, and rushing off at full speed.

The old gentleman in question—who had seen about forty years—received the children very kindly, and let them wander all over the place, and compare everything with the Briarfield possessions, to their hearts' content. He remembered all about the recitation, too, rather to Van's disappointment, and did not offer another prize. Instead, he put Van's memory to the test, by asking him what he had done with the reward money.

"A penny went for sweets—no, two pennies," he began promptly; "and I think there were some nuts and some gingerbread one day—and that squeaky thing for blow-

ing on—it's broken now. What *did* that cost, Katie?"

"Four pennies and three-farthings," Katie answered; "for I know he popped the other little farthing into the mission-box."

"Yes, I remember—Aunt Jane made us."

"And you gave me a halfpenny, Van, but I lost it."

"How much does that come to altogether? Don't you think that must be nearly all?" he asked, anxiously.

Mr. Bishop shook his head. Van couldn't make out whether he was laughing at them, or whether he really wanted to know.

"Well, the rest must have got chucked away somewhere," he said, desperately. "I can't remember. I've got such lots of places for keeping money—I never know where it is. I daresay it's in the jar on my mantelpiece, or inside my best shoes. I think it was once for a while in a hole in the loft. I'll search for it, if you like," he added, in a resigned tone.

But Mr. Bishop said no, he needn't do that; so he couldn't have been angry after

all, especially as he opened the cupboard in the parlour, where the good things were kept, and let the children help themselves.

"We've had a jolly walk, and there's not a drop spilt," Van said, bursting into the parlour, pail in hand.

"And he gave us lemonade, and Van drew the cork; and he made spectacles of the wire, but he lost them on the way home."

"Let's do some see-saw now, Katie; I'm ever so tired with walking home. We couldn't run a bit with the pail. You fetch little Jim, and we'll put him in the middle."

But for once Aunt Hannah had an objection to this favourite amusement.

"Not to-day," she said. "Go and wash hands and faces, and let Martha help you to dress, and then come down to me."

"What's going to happen? Why must we change our dresses? Is there going to be a dinner-party, do you think?" Katie asked all in a breath, as they ran upstairs.

"No," said Van; "there's only one extra knife and fork; I counted. It's the Rector, I daresay. I shouldn't wonder if he's come down to punish us. Aunt Jane always said he would."

"But we haven't done anything naughty, Van,"

"Oh, that doesn't matter. If we haven't to-day, we're sure to to-morrow; and it's all one, when you've got to be punished, whether you get it before or not. I've a good mind to bother Martha just to make up!"

But when the children came down, neat and trim, it was not to see the Rector seated in the large arm-chair. Some one was there, however, who smiled on the two little

figures in the doorway, and held out his hand.

Van stood stock still for a minute, while the blood mounted to his cheeks. Then with one bound he reached the window, and had his arms round his father's neck. "Oh, Daddy, Daddy," he cried, "I thought you were never, never going to come back any more!"

After the first great surprise, there were many questions to ask, and much to tell; and then Aunt Hannah confessed that she had known all the time that Mr. Valentine was coming, but had kept the great secret all to herself.

"What big holes you've got in your cheeks, Father, and ever so much more beard!" said Van, examining him critically. "Is your headache quite gone now?"

"Yes, quite; and it has taken a lot of my hair with it, don't you see? I'll have to steal some of Katie's yellow locks."

"Yes, it *is* rather shiny up on the top," Van answered, climbing up on the back of the chair to inspect it better. "You'll soon

not have any at all, I should think; but you can get some to buy. Aunt Jane has got some curls, I know; I saw them once in her room. You were mad at me for coming in without knocking—weren't you, Aunt Jane?"

But Aunt Jane did not seem to like this question, and Mr. Valentine immediately began to talk of something else, just as if he had never heard it.

The days that followed were happy ones for the children. Mr. Valentine lay in a shady place on the lawn, and told them stories by the hour, and when he was strong enough, he took them for long walks in the fields and lanes. He visited all their pets with them too, and did his best to single out each duck and hen by its own name, though he made a good many mistakes. There was less mischief done too; and with his father there to help him, Van tried to be more polite and obedient to Aunt Jane, and was surprised to find that she was really rather nice after all, though not half-a-quarter so nice as Aunt Hannah.

But the time to bid these kind friends good-bye came at last, for even the very pleasantest visit must end some time.

The packing up of their gathered treasures, the excitement of the railway journey, and the promise of returning next year, softened the thought of going away; besides, Van and Katie—like many other little people—were very fond of change, and had no sooner left Briarfield than they began to look forward to London.

A few days later, however, Katie felt very forlorn and desolate with the big square garden all to herself, and nobody but Augusta for company. For Van and his father had started on their journey to that north country of mountains and lakes. Simon had gone with them, and even Nurse was away for a holiday, so that the big house had all its windows shut up tight, and looked as if it had fallen asleep. Katie almost wished the holidays were at an end. To be sure, that would bring Miss Prosser and lessons back, but it would bring Van too.

Things do not always turn out just as

we expect them, however, for when Van did come back, it was not to stay.

Madame Cornet had gone back at last to her beloved Paris, and had taken Mademoiselle with her, and it was decided that Van should go to school. He liked this prospect a great deal better than Katie did, and was in high spirits because he was no longer to be taught by a woman.

Of course he soon found out that school was not quite like home, but he did not want in courage, and he took the teasing and the rough usage—that generally falls to the lot of a new-comer in a large school—in good part, and soon became a favourite. He did not forget his little companion either, or let himself be tormented out of his liking for a girl. Sometimes he wrote to her—hasty schoolboy scrawls—but which she prized—with more of cricket and of football in them than of lessons. For Van never became a great scholar—his Latin conjugations and declensions were always a grief to him—but he became what is better still, a brave and manly boy, not afraid to stand up for the

truth, or ready to be laughed out of a kind action. Mr. Valentine never told him how much he missed him; but nobody could help seeing how everybody brightened up in holiday-time when he came home.

The house itself seemed to grow younger and livelier, as its old walls rang with shouts of laughter and scraps of song. The house opposite, too, seemed to catch the infection, for Van and his schoolboy friends were always welcome at Katie's home, and room was often found too for Katie—who had long ago laid Augusta tenderly away in a drawer—at the boy-parties which were now so common in the square.

"Nurse is growing quite angelic in her old age," Van said, during one of these holiday times, as he sat with his father after dinner at the dining-room window. "Do you remember how she never would call me anything but 'Master Troublesome'? She told me to-day that she had lost her 'laddie,' and I do believe the dear old thing half regrets it. I've half a mind to show her I can earn the old name yet!"

"You have earned your own instead, my boy," his father said with a smile, looking at the frank, ingenuous face, and recalling another talk about a name. But Van did not hear him.

"Look," he said; "here is Katie coming to pour out our coffee for us;" and he vaulted skilfully on to the steps, and went to meet her.

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